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Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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Editorial

Things change in science fiction. No editor or publisher can afford to be blind to changes, and we hope that the more important ones have been reflected in the pages of F&SF. Yet on this anniversary it is tempting to point to some solid threads of continuity. There is first of all the fact and achievement that F&SF has been published regularly for 281 issues, adding up to 25 years, and that, under five editors (founding editors Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas, Robert Mills, Avram Davidson and myself) has strayed not at all from the goal announced in Volume 1, Number 1 of "offering the best in imaginative fiction."

Beyond that, I would point with pride and gratitude to the contributors to this special issue. All have been writing sf for at least 18 years. All are involved in areas more lucrative or glamorous than writing for the science fiction magazines. It may take a celebration of this sort to get them back to short fiction, but they return to it with superb skill and the kind of enthusiasm that led Ted Sturgeon (who wrote for F&SF's first issue) to call when he heard about this issue and say he *had* to be in it. Now *that's* continuity.

I think it is something more than loyalty or sentimentality that led these writers (and could have led a dozen more like them, if we had the room) to contribute to this issue. I think it reflects the widely felt conviction that the short story or novelet is the best vehicle for science fiction. (As well as the fact that the animal called short fiction is almost extinct outside the sf field.) And I am self-servingly convinced that the science fiction magazines are the best vehicles for presenting short fiction. A lot of sf stories are now being published first in book form, and we can only welcome this development, since the new viewpoints and markets attract and keep talented writers, and that's where it all begins. But a magazine, simply by virtue of its frequent and regular publication — by its *continuity* — has a unique commitment to the writers and the readers of science fiction. Add to this a generally wide availability (via a choice of newsstand or subscription), a willingness to read, develop and publish new writers, and an intelligent and responsive audience, and you have some of the reasons why magazines have been such an important influence in the field and will continue to be for years to come.

As a final, and personal, kind of continuity, I note with some wonder that I have been at this for exactly 120 issues, or ten years. I now turn to Number 282, November 1974, with, I trust, the same agility and dedication demonstrated by the distinguished contributors to this 25th anniversary issue.

—Edward L. Ferman

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It was 25 years ago that R. Bretnor created Papa Schimmelhorn and his unforgettable Gnurrs ("The Gnurrs Come From the Voodvork Out," F&SF Winter-Spring 1950). In this hilarious reappearance, Papa ventures back to the Thirteenth Century on a cavalry mission to save Western Civilization.

Count Von Schimmelhorn and the Time-Pony

by R. BRETNOR

It was General of the Armies Powhattan Fairfax Pollard, U.S.A. (Retired,) who saved Europe from the Mongols and Western Civilization from destruction. But even he — the greatest military leader of the Thirteenth and Twentieth Centuries — could never have managed it without Papa Schimmelhorn's birthday present.

Papa Schimmelhorn took a whole day off from the cuckoo clock factory to put the finishing touches on that present. Full of the joy of giving, he sang as he worked away, adjusting the handlebars, fussing with the sprockets, tightening a bolt here and a nut there. Finally, when everything mechanical had been completed, he buckled a brand new imitation-leather tool kit to the seat and stood back to admire his handiwork.

"*Ach, ja!*" he whispered, stroking his huge gray beard soberly. "Papa, you are a chenius! Und now chust vun more thing —"

He picked up a freshly painted, dappled hobbyhorse head. It was decidedly impressionistic and rather wild-eyed, but its crest was adorned with genuine horsehair. This he fastened to the frame ahead of the handlebars. Then, behind the seat, he added a horsehair ponytail. Finally, lifting the device with one gigantic hand, he carried it up to the living room, where his wife was sitting very stiffly in a straight-backed chair, knitting.

"See!" he exclaimed, as he set it down in front of her. "Is it not beaudtiful?"

Mama Schimmelhorn, whose countenance often reminded people of the less optimistic passages in the Book of Revelation, regarded him without enthusiasm. "You haff shpoiled a bicycle," she observed quite accurately.

Papa Schimmelhorn was hurt. "It iss not shpoiled," he protested.

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"I haff die vheels remofed, und made instead four feet vith inzulators. It iss now a time machine."

His wife rose menacingly. Her black dress crackling, she advanced upon him. "A time machine?" she hissed. "So you can maybe make more gnurrs come from der voodvork out to eat up people's trousers? So you, at eighty years, can maybe run avay, und shtay up late at night vith naked girls? Ha! This time you do not get avay vith! I am too shmart!"

Papa Schimmelhorn retreated, blushing at her obvious reference to the episode which had started his friendship with the general. *"Nein, nein!* Mama, listen! It iss only for der soldier boy I make this time machine! He iss not happy, Mama. They haff made him retire because he beliefes in cavalry. So now I fix. On my machine, he can go back vhere iss plenty of horses — Vaterloo! Chulius Caesar! Bulls Run! Only listen —"

Opening a triangular wooden box attached to the crossbar, he exhibited a singular mess — coils, cogs, gears, a large horseshoe magnet painted red, a big brass escapement, and something that looked like an L-shaped chunk of broken beer bottle. He pointed out how this last object revolved briskly when the pedals were pushed.

"My time machine," he bragged "iss better than any oder time machine. It iss cheaper. It iss also simpler, so a child can operate."

He might have added that he had succeeded in building it exactly two hundred and seventy-seven years before anyone even began to understand the principles of time travel — but of course he was unaware of that.

His wife was not impressed. "Der Herr Great Cheneral," she sniffed, "iss also an old goat, like you. But shtill you should be ashamed. Such trash! Better ve buy a shtand for his umbrella in der hall."

"Mama, I show you!" he cried out. He vaulted to the seat and started pedaling. "Vatch how I —"

For an instant, both he and the machine seemed to waver. For an instant, they both appeared to turn slightly purple. Then, suddenly, he was just sitting there, smiling foolishly and rubbing his left ear.

"Ah-ha! I told you!" crowed Mama Schimmelhorn. "It does not vork, this —"

She broke off, staring. "But — but it iss impossible! *N-now you need a haircut!*"

"Naturlich! I am avay two veeks. In Egypt. I shtay vith friends."

"You — you are not gone vun second!"

"Dot iss because I come back chust vhen I shtarted."

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"But how can der machine get to Egypt vhen it iss here in New Hafen?"

"Because efery time machine iss a shpace-time machine. You cannot separate. Mein old friend Albert, vhen he vas alife at Princeton, could explain it, but I cannot."

Mama Schimmelhorn still had her wits about her. She approached the time machine and peered closely at her husband's ear. There, on its lobe, were the marks of small — and obviously feminine — teeth.

"*So!* You visit Egypt, und you shtay vith friends, und — maybe they are mices! — they bite you in der ear vhen you fly avay?"

Papa Schimmelhorn squirmed guiltily. "In ancient Egypt iss like shaking hands. Also this Cleopatra thinks I am a god — such foolishness! Und all der time I am trying to get back here to Mama." He smirked. "It iss vunderful, my time machine! All der vay back I coast, like down a hill, because der shpring iss vound by going there. But you are right. Ve buy der soldier boy a shtand for his umbrella in der hall. I keep der time machine myself."

Mama Schimmelhorn smiled grimly. "Und shneak again to Egypt for biting in der ear? Iss better for der soldier boy vith horses. I write a note. Ve send to him der time machine tonight!"

Mrs. Camellia Jo Pollard stood sixteen hands high and weighed a hundred and fifty-seven pounds. Had she been a horse, these dimensions would have indicated a surprising slimness. As she was not, she had to go in for steam cabinets, small salads, and more or less violent exercise.

On the morning of the general's birthday, in shorts and halter, she was trying to do push-ups on her bedroom floor. Even with the occasional assistance of her cook — who, still in her early thirties, had survived three tough husbands and fourteen years of active service in army post laundries — she was having a bad time of it. When the doorbell rang, she collapsed promptly and gratefully.

"D-do see who that is, B-Bluebelle dear," she panted. "And if it's anybody for the general —" She sighed. "— just say he won't be back till that awful show is over up in Baltimore."

"Take it easy, kid," grunted Bluebelle, striding off. "It's a horse show, ain't it?"

Mrs. Pollard relaxed luxuriously and felt comfortably sorry for herself. Presently she heard noises downstairs, followed by the front door closing.

"Hey, Mrs. P.!" her cook's voice shouted. "It was two guys with a crate from that screwball with the whiskers! You want I

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should haul it up?"

I suppose it's a present for Powhattan, thought Mrs. Pollard. For a send, she hesitated. Then, "Of course, bring it up!" she called decisively. "We'll open it right now! It'll serve him right for leaving me alone like this."

"I'll get me a claw hammer," replied her cook.

Three minutes later, in the bedroom, they surveyed Papa Schimmelhorn's invention.

Bluebelle pointed with the hammer. "What th' hell?" she grumbled. "A cross between a goddamn hobbyhorse and a beatup bicycle!"

"Oh, it must be more than that!" Mrs. Pollard walked around it, touched it gingerly — and had a flash of inspiration. "Why!" she cried excitedly. "Isn't that just as sweet as sweet can be? Do you suppose he made it every bit himself? I always did say he seemed a nice old man — in spite of all they said. He must've noticed how the general's been gaining weight since he retired. Bluebelle, it's a reducing machine, that's what it is! That's why it hasn't any wheels. And he's given it a horse's head and tail so Powhattan'll be sure to ride it."

Bluebelle, eyeing it suspiciously, began to back away. "I wouldn't touch it, was I you!"

"Nonsense! It'll be much more fun than silly exercises!" She grasped the handlebars and climbed aboard. "See —" Several levers protruded from the wooden box, and she pulled them all at random. "— he's fixed it so you can adjust the — the tension and — and everything." Leaning forward eagerly, she started pumping. Her outline wavered. Both she and the machine turned vaguely purple —

"Hey, *wait!*" bawled Bluebelle.

But Mrs. Pollard and the time machine had disappeared.

The phenomenon had a profound effect on Bluebelle. For a while, she simply goggled at the place where they had been. Then she inspected it carefully for something like a grease spot or an X. After that, she searched all the closets and peered behind the larger bits of furniture. Finally, emitting a shrill wail, she made for the telephone and got through to the general.

"It — it's me, Gen'ral, s-sir!" she sobbed. *"Me!* B-Bluebelle Bottomley, yer cook. She's been *s-s-snatched,* sir! The p-pore little c-c-critter!"

"Mrs. Bottomley, control yourself! Have you the heaves?"

Somehow, Bluebelle managed to inform the general that his wife had vanished, that she had done so on a goddamn beat-up bicycle, and that Papa Schimmelhorn was responsible.

"Have you searched the house?"

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The General's voice was anxious. "You have? Tsk-tsk, Mrs. Bottomley, that's very serious! I am much concerned. I shall take instant action!"

Bluebelle sniffled with relief.

"I'll phone Papa Schimmelhorn," promised the general. "I wish I could come personally, but they're starting on the hunters, and—"

And at that point, Bluebelle dropped the telephone with a piercing scream.

The time machine was back.

Bluebelle stared. Her reddened eyes bugged out. "My Gawd!" she screeched. "Mrs. P., how you've *changed!*"

She lifted the spluttering telephone. "Gen'ral, sir, she's right back here in her stall! And boy, oh boy, oh *boy!* She's dropped forty years and all of fifty pounds! Call me a goddamn liar if she ain't!"

Bluebelle looked again. She saw a long, full gown of green and gold, with an astounding *decolletage,* lace at the wrists, a figure like a bosun's dream, and red lips, and thick black hair, and wildly beautiful green eyes—

"*Whee-whee-ew!* She's a lulu!" Suddenly she choked. "Only — only, Gen'ral, sir, it — *it ain't her!*"

"*What? What's that?*"

"It ain't her! It — it's a later model!"

The girl dismounted from the time machine, shakily thrust a crucifix at Bluebelle, said something unintelligibly Teutonic, and started to back away.

The telephone took on a parade-ground tone. "Hold her there, Mrs. Bottomley! I shall return immediately! Don't let her out of your sight, you hear me?"

"Yes, *sir!*" shouted Bluebelle.

She hung up. She retrieved the hammer. She pointed at a chaise longue in the corner. "Kid," she growled, "you just go set fer a spell. You ain't going' *no place!*"

She seated herself on Mrs. Pollard's bed, where she could keep a wary eye on her charge, who was staring back at her with dilated pupils, and on Papa Schimmelhorn's invention. Presently, the phone rang shrilly, and she answered it.

"Listen carefully, Mrs. Bottomley!" thundered the general. "I have been in touch with Papa — that is, with *Mr.* Schimmelhorn. He is driving over and will join us there. He says you mustn't touch the — the controls of his time machine. Do I make myself clear?"

"Jee-sus, Gen'ral, sir! I wouldn't touch 'em with a ten-foot pole!"

"He says you are to lift the machine very carefully *by the frame,* understand? And lock it in the closet till he gets there."

"S-sir, I — I don't want no truck with it *at* all! D-do I got to?"

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"That is an *order,* Mrs. Bottomley. And don't you lay a finger on those controls!"

The phone clicked off. Muttering apprehensively, Bluebelle edged the time machine into the closet, locked the door, and pocketed the key. "Boy, oh boy!" she addressed the world at large. "Could I use a beer!" She regarded her uninvited guest, who since the phone rang had been sobbing hysterically. "Kid," she said, "it looks like I'm not the only one." She made drinking motions, pointed at herself, and managed to convey the idea that she was going downstairs and would be back right away, and that the girl was to stay put — and she meant *put.*

The girl sobbed a little more loudly than before, but showed no signs of moving, and so Bluebelle took off down the stairs, found a twelve-pack of ale in the kitchen, picked up two pewter beer mugs, and returned to her captive. She opened up two bottles, poured, and proffered one of the foaming mugs.

The girl recoiled, and Bluebelle realized that some sort of communication would have to be established. She downed half her own mug, making exaggerated signs of pleasure, and repeated a bit of Pennsylvania Dutch learned in her childhood from an aged relative. It was a mildly indelicate and imperfectly remembered verse about an elderly lady jumping somebody's fence, but it did sound unmistakably Germanic, and she thought she saw the girl relax a little bit. She followed up by singing one or two stanzas of *Lili Marlene* in Occupation German, drank the rest of her own ale, and was pleased when the girl accepted hers and at least sniffed at it suspiciously.

She filled her mug again, grinned, tapped her capacious bosom, and said, "Me Bluebelle. Catch on, sweetheart? *Bluebelle.*"

Tremblingly, the girl pointed at herself, and whispered, "Ermintrude." Then, bracing herself, she took a sip of ale. Its effect was instantly therapeutic. She took a swallow, then a bigger one.

"That's the stuff, Trudie!" Bluebelle encouraged her, following her example. "Down the hatch!"

By the time Papa Schimmelhorn arrived, almost two hours and several bottles later, both of them were slightly tiddly, and Ermintrude — dazzled by Twentieth Century ale and the luxuries of a Twentieth Century water closet — had stopped weeping, only dabbing at a stray tear or two when either she or Bluebelle happened to hit an especially sentimental note in the ballads they were using as a substitute for intelligible conversation.

Papa Schimmelhorn, instead of being safely home in New Haven,

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had been visiting a grandniece, Fifi Fledermaus, who had abandoned her career as a lady wrestler to manage a topless-bottomless nightspot near Alexandria — an establishment of which Mama Schimmelhorn strongly disapproved. Furthermore, though Baltimore and Alexandria were roughly equidistant from the Pollard residence, the general's five-starred Army Cadillac had been delayed by a series of petty traffic jams which Papa Schimmelhorn's own 1922 Stanley Steamer touring car had escaped. He had beaten his friend home by half an hour, and as soon as his bright blue eyes spied Ermintrude, he realized how fortunate he had been.

"*Ach!*" he exclaimed, as Bluebelle threw the door open for him. "How beautiful! Vot pretty lidtle pussycats they had in die *alten* days!"

Bluebelle eyed him disapprovingly. Grampa, she thought, I can read your mind like it was pictures in a adult bookstore. Well, you ain't goin' to get anywheres near *this* little chick, no sirree!

Papa Schimmelhorn was not insensitive. Entering, he smiled at her, chucked her tenderly under her plump chin, and murmured, "But not zo beaudtiful like my lidtle Bluebelle." He sighed. "*Ach*, if maybe I am forty years younger, but now it iss too late!"

Damn old hippercrite! thought Bluebelle, but she did smile back, admitting to herself that he really was a fine figure of a man, great white beard, modishly shaggy hair, and all. His shoulders stretched the seams of his hound's-tooth-check sports coat over his orange shirt; his mighty thighs bulged the tight, slightly bell-bottomed, wine-colored trousers he had chosen to set off his Stanley Steamer's British Racing Green. "This here's Ermintrude," she informed him, only a trace of reluctance remaining in her voice. "She — she's the one th-they traded in on pore Mrs. P. wh-when they snatched her."

Papa Schimmelhorn gave Ermintrude as grandfatherly a pat as his self-control permitted. "Such a pretty child," he said sanctimoniously. "Soon ve get her maybe safe back home." Then suddenly he was all business. "Frau Bluebelle," he asked anxiously, "tell me — haff you touched die levers on der time machine?"

Bluebelle assured him that she had not.

"Und Ermintrude?"

Bluebelle stuttered that she did not know.

"Okay," declared Papa Schimmelhorn, "ve go upshtairs und maybe ve find out." Then, Bluebelle leading the way, they returned to Mrs. Pollard's bedroom. The time machine was taken

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from its closet and inspected, and he pointed out how he had combined two Japanese calendar wristwatches and an old Chevrolet odometer to show the exact century, year, day, and hour of departure and arrival, and how a curiously contrived mechanism could be manipulated for latitude and longitude. *"Ach!"* he exclaimed. "She has come all der vay from Austria, und from elefen tventy-three a.m., August der eighth, tvelve hundred und forty-vun! Such a long vay from home!"

Then, after Bluebelle had broken out the ale again, he revealed that his genius was by no means just mechanical. The fact that Ermintrude spoke a form of German seven hundred years older than his own did not trouble him at all. "Ve miss a vord," he explained to Bluebelle. "Okay, ve try again. I am a Shviss — all kinds of langvidges und dialects I shpeak."

In scarcely ten minutes, it was clear that they understood each other at least in the essentials; in fifteen, he had determined that she, leaping impuslively to the saddle of the magic horse on which the witch had arrived in the great hall of her father's castle, had done nothing more than touch the pedals; and by the time Bluebelle opened the front door to the returning general, he was sitting on the chaise longue with the lovely Ermintrude on his lap, her little fingers twining in his beard, and her delightful laughter echoing in his ear.

Hastily, as she followed her employer up the stairs, Bluebelle tried to prepare him for this spectacle. "Hey, sir," she commented, "that Papa pal of yours sure is a fast worker — you oughta see how he's been makin' out with that bird they sent us back in place of Mrs. P. He's all man, *buh*lieve me! You ever felt his muscles?"

"For his years," said the general coldly, "Mr. Schimmelhorn is remarkably well preserved."

"Well *preserved?*" grumbled Bluebelle *sotto voce.* "Sir, if you was half that well preserved, you'd still be chasin' majors' wives round Fort Bliss, Texas." She hesitated, decided that it would be more prudent not to mention that she was quoting Mrs. Pollard, and finished rather lamely with, "Beggin' yer pardon, sir, fer the familyarity."

Fortunately, General Pollard did not hear her, for he had reached the bedroom door.

"Soldier boy!" boomed Papa Schimmelhorn joyously as the general strode in. "Velcome home! Look vhat I haff done. First I make you der magic horse to ride back into der past, vhen iss lots of horses! Then ve haff caught a pretty pussycat — lidtle Ermintrude from der Thirteenth Century."

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He burst abruptly into song. "Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday, dear soldier boy! Happy Birthday *to you!*"

Bluebelle enthusiastically joined in, except that she tactfully substituted "Gen'ral, sir" for "soldier boy," and Ermintrude, staring wide-eyed at the general, began to giggle.

Black Jack Pershing, a fellow cavalryman who also had attained the exalted rank of General of the Armies, had once remarked that Lieutenant Powhattan Fairfax Pollard looked more like a horse than any human being he had ever met. This expert observation had remained quite valid. The patrician planes of General Pollard's face, the arrogance of his slightly Roman nose, the way he tossed his mane of gray hair and flared his nostrils as he regarded Ermintrude — all these endowed him with an unmistakably equine quality, an effect in no way spoiled by his immaculate Peale boots, perfectly tailored breeches, and a jacket straight from Savile Row.

Ermintrude giggled again and whispered to Papa Schimmelhorn. He in turn chuckled appreciatively and whispered back to her. Then they both laughed.

General Pollard glanced at the time machine, shook his head as though to clear it of obfuscations, and took the chair Bluebelle offered him.

"She asked me who you vere," explained Papa Schimmelhorn. "So I haff told her you are married to die vitc — die lady who vas caught vhen der time machine appeared in der hall. Alvays iss better for a young voman to be told vhen an older man iss married, *nicht wahr?*"

"Have you told her about Mrs. Schimmelhorn?" enquired the general icily.

"*Naturlich,*" purred Papa Schimmelhorn, pinching Ermintrude. "I haff tried, but she does not beliefe. She says I do not haff der married look — imachine it, after more than sixty years! Her husband vas a *graf,* a count in Austria, but he vas killed two years ago in a big battle vith die Turks — zo sad! Her papa also iss a *graf,* mit a big castle near Wiener-Neustadt, so I haff told her I am a count also, Graf von Schimmelhorn, because vay back in A.D. Tvelve forty-vun it iss important. This also she does not beliefe, because —" He pointed at the time machine. "— she knows already I am der great magician, und thinks I am also maybe somevun else. But if I am a graf perhaps it helps vhen pretty soon I take her home und bring you Mrs. Pollard back again."

"Hm-m-m," remarked the general thoughtfully. "I am a

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simple soldier, Papa, as you know. While I appreciate what you have done for me — while I look forward eagerly to visiting all the most famous cavalry actions of the past — this does take a little getting used to. Perhaps we would be wiser not to hurry? Camellia has always been intensely interested in history. She probably is finding this, er, excursion highly entertaining and instructive. I wouldn't want to deprive her of the chance to make the most of it. The count, this young lady's father, is probably entertaining her quite lavishly, and surely we must do the same for his charming daughter, don't you agree?"

Papa Schimmelhorn exchanged a few words with Ermintrude. "She says her papa thinks maybe Mrs. Pollard iss a Tatar shpy, but he perhaps vill not torture her because he vants der magic horse to bring his Ermintrude back."

"*Torture* her?" exclaimed the general. "Why, that's unthinkable!"

"Not for Tatar shpies in tvelve hundred and forty-vun," answered Papa Schimmelhorn. "But don't you vorry, soldier boy. I think she maybe iss okay. Like I tell Mama, my time machine iss different from oder time machines. Ve shtay here maybe a veek, it does not matter — vhen it goes back, it can go to exactly vhen it shtarted. Mrs. Pollard vill not know it has been avay vun second. Like Herr Doktor Jung has said vhen he examined me in der old country, all my chenius iss in der subconscience, so I cannot explain to you vhy."

"Well, anyhow," said General Pollard, "it is a great relief to me to know that no harm is going to come to her. So why don't we just lock the machine up again, and Ermintrude can be our guest here for a few days? We can, well, show her all the sights of the Twentieth Century, and —"

He broke off as Bluebelle snorted impolitely.

"Soldier boy," said Papa Schimmelhorn, "you haff forgotten vun shmall thing. Your vife iss in der Thirteenth Century, but Mama shtill iss in New Hafen, here und now." He shook his head. "Besides, poor Ermintrude iss vorried about her papa und eferybody there. She has asked me if I am somevun called a — how does she say? — a Priester —"

"A what?"

"A —" He hesitated. He exchanged a word or two with Ermintrude. "*Nein,* she says a *Presbyter* — somebody called Presbyter Johannes, a great king who comes on der magic horse to chase avay die Turks und Tatars, because now outside der castle die Tatars burn und loot und rape."

Suddenly General Pollard's eyes

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were no longer fixed on Ermintrude. *"Presbyter Johannes!"* he cried out. "That was the German form of *Prester John* — the mythical Christian monarch of the East!" He leaped abruptly to his feet. "Millions of medieval Europeans believed he'd rescue them from the barbarians."

Papa Schimmelhorn winked. "Maybe in der Thirteenth Century I could be for a lidtle vhile a great king. But I am modest — it iss maybe better for die lidtle pussycats if I am only a great magician und Graf von Schimmelhorn."

"Pussycats!" The general snorted his impatience. "What *year* did she say she comes from?"

"Tvelve hundred und forty-vun."

"What *month* was it?"

"August. It iss not yet qvite September."

"My God!" the general gasped. "Do you know what this may mean? All authorities agree the Mongols broke off their invasion in the *Spring*. Ogatai, their Great Khan, was dead, and their law required that they return immediately to choose a new one. Subutai, their ranking general, insisted on it. Long before August they were gone. Papa, if what she says is true, something's badly wrong! Back there, seven hundred years ago, Western Civilization is imperiled. Ask her if she is completely sure!"

Ermintrude became deadly serious. She began to sob once more.

"She iss qvite sure," translated Papa Schimmelhorn. "Die Mongols haff surrounded Vienna und Viener-Neustadt, und Drachendonnerfels, her papa's castle. Dot iss vhy he thinks maybe Mrs. Pollard iss a Tatar shpy. Und efen if der Great Khan iss dead, they are going first to conquer Italy und Burgundy und France und eferything. She knows this iss all true, because her papa, der Graf Rudolf von Kroissengrau, has been told by Thorfinn Thorfinnson, who iss a great man in his own country und a general also, chust like you, only she says shtronger und more handsome."

The general's eyes rolled. His nostrils flared. He began pacing up and down. "We can't just sit here and — and watch Western Civilization founder under us. Never! Those people need a leader — and one who understands the use of modern cavalry. Papa, your time machine is a godsend to the Thirteenth Century. Let us leave at once!"

"But my machine has room only for me und lidtle Ermintrude," demurred its inventor.

"Then *I* must ride it back. She can come with *me*."

"Soldier boy, you do not

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understand. First, you must know *how* to ride."

"*I* don't know how to *ride?*"

"Not a time machine," said Papa Schimmelhorn, "efen if it looks like a horse. You vill haff to practice a lidtle at a time, first maybe chust to yesterday or tomorrow."

Abruptly, General Pollard realized that no training manual on the mastery and management of time machines had yet been issued. "There's certainly no way to mount more than two on your device," he admitted reluctantly, "unless, of course, Ermintrude could sit sideways on my lap?"

"How about me?" put in Bluebelle agressively.

"*You?*"

"*Me.* Look, Gen'ral, sir, if you go kitin' off to save Europe from them Mongrels, it's goin' to take you quite a spell. Pore little Mrs. P.'s gonna get stuck back there with yer, and stayin' with all them counts and dukes and what-alls, she'll need more'n jest shorts and a halter. She'll need me, too, takin' care of her, and that ain't all — sir, how're you goin' to get by without Sarjint Leatherbee?"

General Pollard admitted to himself that her points were well taken. Mrs. Pollard would undoubtedly want to cut a figure worthy of him in the social whirl of Drachendonnerfels Castle, and certainly he had not gotten by without his combined chauffeur and orderly, farrier, and confidant for many years.

"And perhaps, Mrs. Bottomley," he growled, "you have thought of a way to take us all back there?"

"Sure," answered Bluebelle vigorously. "If you can't get everybody onto a horse, you just hitch a buggy onto it."

"We do not own a buggy, Mrs. Bottomley."

"Nossir, but you got that pony cart you bought for yer grandkids. We could hitch it to this here time-pony smart as Sunday."

The general, visualizing the vehicle in question, closed his eyes and shuddered. Then his sense of duty prevailed. "Can this be done, Mr. Schimmelhorn?" he asked.

Papa Schimmelhorn scratched his head. "I think maybe *ja.* In der car I haff some lidtle copper tubing, about tventy feet. Ve tie it all around, und — how vould Albert say? — zo ve can stretch der time field. I haff to pump die pedals harder, dot iss all."

"Well, then!" Once again, the general was his decisive self. "Let's set about it! Mrs. Bottomley, tell Sergeant Leatherbee to report to me at the stable immediately. He is to dust off the pony cart and pull it out between the stalls. I will give him his other orders there."

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"Yes, *sir!*" replied Bluebelle enthusiastically, banging off down the stairs.

General Pollard followed at a more restrained pace, and Papa Schimmelhorn, laden with the time-pony and with Ermintrude clinging trustingly to his arm, brought up the rear. He paused on the stairs to kiss her pretty neck and listen to her giggle, and then, when the general glared back reprovingly, marched on.

Bluebelle found the sergeant in his cottage just behind the stable, still in dress blues and drinking a tall beer. Rather incoherently, she told him all about the time machine and what had taken place; and his rugged countenance, rendered even more picturesque by the fact that it had once been stepped on by a mule, betrayed no emotion whatsoever at her news. At her mention of the Mongols, he did grunt, "Arrh — *gooks!*" and took another swallow of his beer. Finally, he asked her if that goddamn old civilian really had fixed himself some kind of time machine; and when she assured him that this was indeed the case, he drained his glass, buttoned his blouse, and stood up ready for the fray. "Now that's real nice," he commented as they headed for the stable after he had left word with Mrs. Leatherbee to hold the fort while he was gone. "Mebbe he can run me back to Ringgold, back in '37. Hank Hokinson — he was the topkick for old F Troop — he owed me pretty near eleven bucks from poker. Got himself killed off before I could collect."

Bluebelle gave him a hand dusting the pony cart, and everything was ready when Papa Schimmelhorn appeared, having located his coil of copper tubing in the back seat of the Stanley Steamer. As he began to putter with it, General Pollard briefed the sergeant once again in concise military terms.

Sergeant Latherbee listened, standing at attention.

"At ease!" said the general finally. "Sergeant, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir —" Pointing at the time-pony and the cart, which Papa Schimmelhorn was endeavoring to unite, he hesitated. Then, "General, sir," he blurted. "With the general's permission, sir, it just ain't *right* for the general to be riding in that hickus! It — sir, it ain't *dignified.* Sir, I could saddle up Mrs. Roosevelt with your field saddle, and you could ride right alongside of us."

At the mention of his favorite bay mare, the general groaned. The pony cart had a tubby wicker body, reached by two metal steps and an opening in the back. Its seats, arrayed around its sides, were

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perhaps adequate for children. Even by itself, it was scarcely a vehicle for a ranking general officer.

"Papa," said General Pollard wistfully, "would it be at all possible? — I mean, *could* I ride alongside?"

"Nein, soldier boy," replied Papa Schimmelhorn. "I haff not enough copper tubing, und anyhow maybe Mrs. Roosevelt vould not hold shtill."

The general squared his shoulders. "Our duty to Western Civilization," he declared heroically, "is more important than mere appearances. Let us proceed!" He looked at his watch. "Be ready to move out in half an hour. Full field uniform, rations for at least a week, first aid supplies, sidearms. And boots and spurs, Sergeant — in that century we very well may have to function mounted."

"Yes, *sir!*" barked Sergeant Leatherbee. "I'll pass the word to my old lady."

"Mrs. Bottomley, please get together all the clothes and trinkets you believe Mrs. Pollard may require. And Mr. Schimmelhorn, if you need any additional equipment, please say so now."

"I take maybe two or three cuckoo clocks, but already I haff them in der car."

"Cuckoo clocks?"

"Ja." Papa Schimmelhorn winked at him. "Dot iss vun reason Cleopatra thinks I am a god."

He went back to the congenial task of hitching the time pony and the pony cart together with the copper tubing (which now began and ended in the box containing the pedal-driven mechanism) and with odds and ends of leather straps and latigos, which he fastened to the shafts and to a miscellany of loose ends. And General Pollard, after one last unhappy look at the contraption, went off to array himself for his great task.

Half an hour later, all was ready. Bluebelle, in her Sunday best, had packed two suitcases and an overnight bag. Sergeant Leatherbee, booted, spurred, helmeted, and under arms, had loaded the specified supplies into the pony cart, together with a few quarts of the general's bourbon and a case of ale, while Mrs. Leatherbee watched disapprovingly. Papa Schimmelhorn had brought three cuckoo clocks in their cardboard cartons from the Stanley Steamer, and had demonstrated one of them to Ermintrude. Finally and magnificently, the general had put in his appearance. He wore his World War II helmet, to which his five stars had subsequently been attached, and his pre-World War II leather field belt, from which

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hung, not just his service pistol, but also the splendid sword of honor presented to his grandfather by the grateful citizens of Fredericksburg, and he had not forgotten his binoculars.

He regarded his command approvingly. "Report, Sergeant!"

"All present or accounted for, sir!"

"Very well. We shall dispense with an inspection. Papa Schimmelhorn, you may stand to horse. Sergeant Leatherbee will ride behind you, and Miss Ermintrude in the cart with Mrs. Bottomley and me. At my command, we shall —"

At this point, he was interrupted by a torrent of words from Miss Ermintrude, to whom Papa Schimmelhorn had whispered a running translation. She would *not* ride back there with that old man — she did not trust him. She wished to ride pillion behind the great magician, who was so nice and strong —

The general got the message, and gave it with ill grace. Bluebelle snickered rudely from her seat among the bags. The general, summoning all his dignity, stepped up into the vehicle and sat down next to her, his knees almost to his chin; and he was followed by the sergeant. Papa Schimmelhorn and Ermintrude mounted the time-pony.

"Move out!" commanded General Pollard.

"Yoicks!" shouted Bluebelle. "Tally-ho!"

One of the cuckoo clocks spoke its piece raucously four times.

Then all of them, the time-pony, and the cart wavered momentarily, turned vaguely purple, and disappeared.

While the Lady Ermintrude had tried to tell the simple truth when she said she had touched none of the controls, she was mistaken, for her gown, in mounting, had flicked at one of them. Therefore poor Camellia Jo Pollard had to endure a difficult few minutes which she otherwise would have been spared.

When she and the time machine first appeared in the great hall of Drachendonnerfels Castle, her consternation was no greater than that of the multitude assembled there. She looked around her, at swords and spears and chain mail and ferocious faces, and panicked. She leaped from the machine, darted left and right, uttered a bloodcurdling cry, was attacked by a great slavering hound, took refuge behind a vast bearded blond man with a horned helmet on his head, was seized at someone's order by two knights, and then was set upon by a mitered archbishop with shrewd eyes, who seemed determined, at one and the same time, to question her and exorcise her. It was in this confusion that

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Ermintrude rashly made off on the magic horse — which did nothing to improve matters. Ermintrude's father, Graf Rudolf, red-faced and whiskered and mighty as a beer barrel, strode down from his high seat through the crowd and demanded what she had done with his beloved daughter. The archbishop at once cautioned him against being too rude to a witch who, as they had seen, possessed unknown and terrible powers. And Mrs. Pollard, understanding none of this, and seeing that he was apparently a man of God, burst into tears, dropped to her knees before him, implored him to save her, and kissed his crucifix — which was, of course, the best thing she could have done, for instantly those present were split into two factions, one still afraid she was a wicked witch and doubtless a Tatar agent, the other sure she was a good witch sent by God to save them from the enemy. Tumult raged, some arguing loudly that they should waste no time in dragging her before the torturers, others that they should give her gifts, feed her with rich meats, and otherwise seek to win her favor. Several women shrieked. Then the archbishop placed his right hand protectingly upon her head and pointed out that wicked witches did not kiss crucifixes and argued wisely that any ill-advised decision might not only lose them a powerful ally, but also endanger the missing Ermintrude.

And at that point, the magic horse returned.

It returned dramatically. In that unreal pearly shimmer which is time travel, when the whole universe seems to consist only of the travelers and their time machine, General Pollard had been alarmed by an idea. "Papa!" he shouted. "How do we know there won't be other people? I mean, or things? There in the hall, in the same space where we'll appear?"

"Don't worry, soldier boy!" Papa Schimmelhorn shouted back. "Dot iss impossible. Und anyhow der crystal in der box makes a vibration, zo eferybody alvays iss shcared avay! Also, this time ve — how do you say? — ve try to *jell* a lidtle shlowly, und chust before they see us maybe you shoot der pistol vunce or tvice in der air."

"See to it, Sergeant Leatherbee," the general said.

"Yes, sir." The sergeant drew his pistol. "Soon as Mr. What's-his-names gives the word."

Around them, the great hall of Drachendonnerfels became vaguely visible. Instinctively, part of the crowd was giving way.

"Ve can see, but for a second they cannot see us," said Papa Schimmelhorn. "Now qvickly mit der pistol —"

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Sergeant Leatherbee clicked the safety off.

"Shoot!"

The .45 roared three times in the hall.

And there they were.

Hubbub surrounded them: the shouts of men, the screams of women, the howling of assorted dogs, clashes of steel.

Instantly, the Lady Ermintrude jumped from the time-pony, seized Papa Schimmelhorn's huge hand to drag him with her, and darted to her father where he stood, sword half drawn, in front of them.

"Ermintrude!" he bellowed joyfully, embracing her. "You are safe?"

And Ermintrude assured him that she was, that she had been treated like a queen by the nice magician she was clinging to, whom she had thought was Prester John, but who insisted he was only Graf von Schimmelhorn — though he had a magic castle far away where they used fresh water for the strangest purposes — and he was going to save them from the Tatars, and —

Rudolf, Count von Kroissengrau, was a doting father, and he naturally was limited by the beliefs and fancies of his century. But he was tough and powerful, and his level head and high intelligence had, until then at least, kept him alive and Drachendonnerfels secure in the most perilous of times. Unlike Twentieth Century men, he did not automatically recoil from any hint of magic forces; indeed, if they appeared beneficent, he was quite ready to take advantage of them. He demanded silence from the hall and from his daughter, and received it. Then, very formally, he introduced himself to Papa Schimmelhorn, reciting all his titles and the more important details of his lineage.

Papa Schimmelhorn replied in kind, giving himself a castle in the Alps, a thousand men-at-arms, a doctorate in the arcane sciences from Princeton University, and any number of suddenly ennobled ancestors and relatives, including Fifi Fledermaus, whom he proclaimed a baroness. After that, dramatically, he introduced General and Mrs. Pollard as the Prince and Princess Palatine of Washington and the Potomac, and explained that the general was a veritable Alexander, Scipio, Hannibal, and Caesar rolled into one, who could save them from the Mongols if anybody could.

The general stepped down from the pony cart and saluted. So did Sergeant Leatherbee. Bluebelle, whom Papa Schimmelhorn had explained away as Mrs. Pollard's lady-in-waiting, followed them and essayed a clumsy curtsey.

Fired by Ermintrude's enthu-

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siasm, Count Rudolf was suitably impressed. He declared that Drachendonnerfels was honored by so high a company and welcomed their assistance against the enemy. "I do not doubt," he declared, sighing heavily, "that the prince is a paladin of high renown in his own country. Unhappily, my castle now is full of great commanders without armies. The demon Tatars have made mincemeat of them. No, I am afraid that we have more use for a magician here than for any number of great generals. But we shall speak of all these matters later. First we shall feast; then I shall show you Drachendonnerfels and our defenses; after that we shall take counsel. In a moment, I shall have my heralds proclaim you, after you have met those men upon whose strength and wisdom I most rely —"

Ermintrude interrupted him by whispering in his ear.

"Of course!" he told her. "I am ashamed I did not think of it. You may escort the princess and her lady to a proper chamber so that she can don raiment better suited to her rank and dignity." And he bowed ceremoniously to Mrs. Pollard as she was led away, Bluebelle hefting the luggage in her wake.

Then Papa Schimmelhorn and the general were presented successively to the archbishop, whose name was Alberic and who was cousin to the King of Bohemia, to a variety of counts and barons, a Prior of the Knights Templars, several fiery Hungarian magnates, a vastly dark and strangely scarred old man from the Carpathians, and finally, with special pride, to the blond giant in the Viking helm, who — Papa Schimmelhorn had noticed — had seemed unable to take his eyes off Bluebelle and was still staring in the direction of her disappearance.

"This," declared Count Rudolf, "is Thorfinn Thorfinnson, who now commands our troops. He is a mighty warrior from far away, who has been made a baron by the Emperor. He was in the service of the High Prince of Vladimir, until the High Prince yielded to the Tatars and swore fealty to them. He knows all about these Tatars and how they fight and even understands their barbarous tongue."

A touch regretfully, Thorfinn Thorfinnson turned his attention to Papa Schimmelhorn. "Sir Count and Magician," he declared, as they clasped hands, "in my travels I have seen many wonders. I have seen wily Finns with bags of wind to sell, and such as could turn lead into pure gold. But your magic horse is not only the most wonderful of all, but the most useful." His laughter boomed out through the hall. "Perhaps it can

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outspeed the horses of the Tatars — God knows no others can!"

Suddenly Thorfinn's name and accent and appearance all clicked into place, and Count von Schimmelhorn was reminded of an episode during his misspent youth, when he had followed a pretty pussycat named Ragnhild to her home in Iceland, where for months they had scandalized the community in which she lived before she married a local fisherman and bade him farewell. Naturally, he had learned the language fluently, and now he remembered that Modern Icelandic differed very little from Old Norse.

To Thorfinn's astonishment, he heard himself hailed in his native tongue. He drew back. Then he reached forward and embraced Papa Schimmelhorn in a bear hug. "God be praised!" he bellowed. "He has sent us a true magician, one who has lived in my own isle! Sir Count, tell me — surely your mother at least was my countrywoman? I am certain of it! Now we need no longer fear the Tatars! You and I shall be sworn brothers — I swear it by this helmet which belonged to my great-grandfather, the renowned Havar Bearbiter! — and we together shall drive the Tatars from this land!"

Papa Schimmelhorn pounded him on the back and bellowed back just as joyfully. He had found understanding Count Rudolf, and making himself understood in turn, rather more difficult than getting through to Ermintrude. Thorfinn, he realized, would be a great help in bridging the communications gap.

Explanations were made to the count and to the Pollards, and Papa Schimmelhorn dutifully translated a short speech of the general's concerning the Mongol threat to Western Civilization and the importance of a really effective cavalry leadership, which he was prepared to provide. His message was listened to very soberly, but with scant enthusiasm. Count Rudolf thanked His Highness politely for his offer and the sentiment behind it, but he was compelled to point out that Drachendonnerfels was a solitary rock in a sea of horsemen and that this Tatar cavalry was unfortunately the only cavalry available.

He escorted them to the High Table, ordered ale and wine to be poured, and accepted a bottle of the general's bourbon which Papa Schimmelhorn presented to him. Sergeant Leatherbee mounted guard over the time-pony and its cart, glaring suspiciously at the four knights detailed by Thorfinn Thorfinnson to assist him. Soon Mrs. Pollard was escorted in again, now dry-eyed and robed in spendor. She wore the evening

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gown created for her to celebrate the general's triumph over the gnurrs, and a fantastic display of jewelry culminating in a tiara, none of which the Thirteenth Century recognized as costume. Ermintrude led her to the High Table, seated her next to her Prince Palatine and General of the Armies, and took her own seat between her father and Count von Schimmelhorn, whose knee she surreptitiously squeezed under the table. At the count's command, the heralds did their stuff, and Papa Schimmelhorn impressed everyone tremendously by presenting a cuckoo clock to Ermintrude and demonstrating it several times. Then they feasted, after Count Rudolf had apologized for the meager fare forced upon them by the vicissitudes of war. Serfs and servants bustled back and forth with steaming joints, roast fowl, boars' heads, wine and ale — all in the decidedly pungent atmosphere typical of a crowded Thirteenth Century castle, where the principles of military sanitation were not properly comprehended.

Sniffing, General Pollard remarked upon this to his wife. "They certainly know nothing about mess hall management," he told her. "And I don't suppose they'd appreciate my teaching them."

Mrs. Pollard, gnawing at the drumstick of a swan served her by the count's own hands, agreed that they might not. "But anyway," she whispered, "I'm sure it's all organic, so there isn't *that* for you to fret about. Just this once I'm going to forget all about my calories."

Papa Schimmelhorn conversed with Ermintrude, with her father, and with Thorfinn Thorfinnson, who sat beside him. He told them of the war against the gnurrs, about which Thorfinn promised to compose a glorious saga, and wisely he said nothing about coming from the future, explaining that the land of the Prince Palatine lay far across the ocean to the West. Then Thorfinn, wonderingly, remarked that if it lay even beyond Vinland it must be indeed remote, which removed any need for further explanation.

General Pollard, meanwhile, discovered to his joy that he was by no means as linguistically isolated as he had supposed. In his pre-Academy days, he had attended a very strict and famous private school for boys, where for six years he had studied Latin, at which he had excelled, practically memorizing Caesar, Livy, Polybius, and other works of military interest. Now, when Archbishop Alberic, beside him, addressed him in that tongue, he almost neighed with pleasure and launched into a disquisition on the martial uses of

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the horse which not only impressed the cleric, but made him wonder momentarily whether, by some miracle, the patron saint of horses had been sent down to them.

The archbishop discussed such questions as whether the Tatars were the Scourge of God, punishing Christians for their many sins, or simply instruments of Satan. The general, bowing to his superior expertise, confined himself to the Tatars and their horses, and how horses might best be used to drive them off. They got along famously, and when Count Rudolf's final belch signaled that the feast was over, if not sworn brothers, they at least were friends.

Then the count took them for a guided tour of Drachendonnerfels and its defenses. It was a mighty structure of gray stone, crowning and dominating a narrow-waisted peninsula around which a river flowed. Its battlements frowned over sheer cliffs on three sides, and beneath them stretched a gently sloping, lightly wooded area where a mob of refugees was now encamped, together with their motley household goods and domestic animals. These were the ones who had been unable to crowd into the castle proper. They came from far and near — Germans and Magyars and Bohemians, and strange men from stranger tribes once unknown in the Christian West. Their smells and noises floated up the walls. Here and there in the distance, the smoke of burnings could be seen, and far away but clearly visible a Mongol *tuman* riding at full gallop, its disciplined tens and hundreds following their yak-tail standards.

"There they are!" Count Rudolf pointed. "Without mercy. Tireless. Raiding as they ride, they move as far in a single day as we do in a week, and then do battle. When we have them trapped, they vanish; when we least expect them, they appear. They are not demons — for they die like other men. But surely demons must be riding with them." He shuddered. "Come, let us hold council."

As they parted from the ladies, Thorfinn Thorfinnson lagged behind a little with his sworn brother and whispered in his ear. "The Lady Bluebelle," he enquired, "is she married?"

Papa Schimmelhorn assured him that, at least at the moment, she was not.

"Ah-ha!" cried Thorfinn. "That is good! Look at her — clear white skin, thick hair, good strong teeth — and her thighs! Never have I seen a woman with thighs so broad. I tell you, she and I would breed mighty sons! I shall wait. Then, when we succeed against the Tatars, perhaps you will speak to her in my behalf?"

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And Papa Schimmelhorn, who did not consider Bluebelle a pretty little pussycat, promised him he'd do his very best.

Rudolf von Kroissengrau held his council of war high in a turret room overlooking his Mongol-ravaged countryside. Present were the Prince Palatine of Washington and the Potomac, Thorfinn Thorfinnson, the Archbishop Alberic, the count himself, the Prior of the Knights Templars, the dark, curiously scarred old man from the Carpathians, several members of the greater and lesser nobility who, having been deprived of their armed forces by the Mongols, had lost much status, and Papa Schimmelhorn, who felt rather out of place because he really wasn't a military man and would much rather have been with Ermintrude.

Count Rudolf opened the proceedings by inviting the prince, as ranking noble and most illustrious commander there, to present his plan. The general rose, declared modestly that he was just a simple soldier who would do his best, and then, at length and with much technical detail, obliged him. He spoke sometimes in English, which was translated by Papa Schimmelhorn, and sometimes in sonorous Latin, which the archbishop interpreted.

"But it is not simply my long experience or my knowledge of the most advanced doctrines of cavalry employment which persuade me that it is my mission to defeat the Tatar enemy. No, my friends! Consider — my noble wife, impelled by that feminine curiosity and frailty with which we are all familiar, leaped onto the magic horse, a gift to me from Graf von Schimmelhorn, and was instantly brought here to Drachendonnerfels! Again, the Lady Ermintrude, perhaps similarly inspired, took her place in the saddle and was at once transported back to me. Who can doubt that the Hand of God brought me here, where obviously I am so badly needed?"

They had listened to him, gravely silent; and now the old man from the Carpathians arose, begged the count's leave to speak, and, leaning heavily on his huge, two-handed sword, addressed them in a voice harsh as the scrape of dungeon hinges.

"Great Prince," he said, "I myself have no doubt that your arrival was indeed a miracle —"

Everyone at the table nodded.

"— but yet we must not read the Will of God too readily, lest we read it not aright. From what you have explained of your country's cavalry, I am sure that given time you could build us a force the Tatars would indeed have to reckon with. But you have told us that we

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must unite the kings and princes of the west and north and south, most of whom, despite the Tatar threat, are at daggers drawn. Highness, even if you yourself appeared to each of them on your magic horse — even then few would unite, or if they did it would take months of arguing. Let me tell you of these Tatars!" His scarred mouth twisted savagely. "My keep in the Carpathian Mountains was impregnable. For a hundred years, and half a hundred more, it had remained inviolate. Sir, *they* stormed and captured it within eight hours. And when they first appeared, I obeyed my orders from the king and sent my messengers riding the fastest horses in the land to warn him. Aye, they warned King Bela, on his throne in Budapest — *and even as they did so the first Tatar patrols entered the outskirts of the city.* My messengers only had to ride. The Tatars, in their thousands, rode and burned, raped and slew and looted — and took no longer to arrive. No, Your Highness, by the time we could unite the kings of Christendom, by the time you could train their forces, Christendom would be no more, and the foul Tatars would rule everything to the Western Sea. Your own lands, which Baron Thorfinn tells me are far, far away, beyond any we have yet imagined, may have the power to hold them off — but have you enough magic horses to bring your power to *us?* Surely we must deliberate very carefully and seek to learn if God did not have some other end in view when He sent you and this great magician to our aid, for which —" He bowed his head. "— I humbly thank Him."

There was a murmur of approval, and sadly the archbishop said, "Highness, more than once we have sent embassies begging kings and princes to unite with us — and they never heed us until the Tatars are at their very gates. Lord Koloman is right. Unless you can indeed bring your mighty armies swiftly across the sea, we must indeed find another way.

General Pollard, on the point of arguing, suddenly realized that the failure of Christendom to unite against the Mongols had not been for want of trying on the part of dedicated, far-sighted men. He sighed and, temporarily at least, filed away his mental picture of himself, with drawn sword, leading an army of cavalry greater than any mobilized since the War Against the Gnurrs.

"Lord Koloman," asked Count Rudolf, "in what way can we prevail if not with our swords? You are wise in the ways of war and of our enemy. What thoughts come to your mind?"

"I do not know," Lord

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Koloman said slowly, "but if we cannot hope to match the Tatars' strength, then I can think of one way only — to outwit them. That will be very difficult, for they are serpents in their subtlety. Their spies are everywhere. Everywhere traitors lurk to do their bidding."

For a moment, despondency descended on the room. Then Thorfinn Thorfinnson laughed his enormous laugh. "Friend Koloman, all that was yesterday! Today we have a great magician, who has become sworn brother to me, and with him he has brought this mighty captain. Yes, there are spies and traitors everywhere, and so word of their arrival will go swiftly to Prince Batu and to Subutai. They will at once want to know more — remember, they never move without learning every detail about their enemies."

"And what will happen then?" Count Rudolf asked.

Two or three of the dispossessed nobles in the room stirred uneasily, and one of them spoke up. "Th-they will concentrate, and they will storm this castle regardless of the cost! That is what will happen!"

Suddenly Thorfinn Thorfinnson towered over them. "Then you will be killed!" he roared. "Do you fear to die?"

The nobles shrank away, and again Thorfinn laughed aloud. "One reason you have been defeated and are here is because you do not understand this enemy. Do you think Subutai is stupid? He will see instantly that a magician who can appear in a twinkling on a magic horse can vanish just as quickly! Even if our walls came down he would have nothing for his pains. No, he will try more devious methods — and so must we."

He sat down, and Count Rudolf again took over. Everyone's spirits had been raised, except perhaps General Pollard's, and now the discussion of what might be done became general. It went on for about twenty minutes with no noticeable result. Then, when all were on the point of giving up, the archbishop took time out to pray for guidance, and his prayers were answered.

"Noble sirs," he declared. "In our pride, we have rudely neglected our first duty. We have not asked advice of the great magician whom God has sent us." He turned to Papa Schimmelhorn. "Sir Count, your pardon. Pray give us your sage counsel."

Papa Schimmelhorn hadn't really had his mind on the proceedings for some time and had been trying to figure out a way to bow out gracefully and play games with Ermintrude. Now he shook his head to clear it, furrowed his brow in thought, and, speaking to the general, said the first thing that

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came to mind. "Soldier boy," he said, "vhy don't ve take maybe a few Mongols for lidtle ride in der time-pony und der cart? They don't undershtand about time trafel, und ve show them all your cavalry. Maybe then they are shcared und run avay back home?"

While the general stared at him open-mouthed, absorbing the idea, he explained it to the others, taking care to edit out his comment about time travel.

A shocked silence greeted his suggestion, followed immediately by a confusion of alarms and protests, summed up after a few moments by the Prior of the Templars.

"The Tatars are without honor!" he shouted. "They cannot be trusted in a magic cart with Christians! Besides, because they are limbs of Stan, they know no fear — so how can they be frightened off even by the terrible spectacles of the prince's armies?"

He was answered by Thorfinn Thorfinnson, who first held up his hand portentously for silence. "It is true, Sir Prior, that the Tatars are without honor as we know it. And it is also true that they are very brave. But that does not mean that they know no caution. Consider how assiduously they avoid the pitfalls of our strength to strike at our unguarded weaknesses! The course suggested by my sworn brother is fraught with peril, but if the prince's forces are indeed as awe-inspiring as we have heard, Subutai may very well decide that there is more to gain by withdrawing than by pushing on. Besides, have we another choice?"

The archbishop turned to General Pollard. "Highness," he said, "do you consider that this plan has merit?"

The general's eyes flashed again. Once more he saw himself, if not actually at the head of mounted armies, at least in a position to decide their destinies. He felt inspired. He stood erect. "Listen!" he proclaimed. "This will be my message to the Tatars — that when they behold the cavalry of my country and those surrounding it, they will at once take flight! I shall tell them that, as Prince Palatine of Washington and the Potomac, I wish to spare my vassals and my allies the trouble and expense of bringing our vast forces over the great Western Sea, but that if they do not instantly retire into Asia, I most assuredly shall do so — for we too are Christians and your kinsmen! If they persist, I shall destroy them utterly. That is my message! Let it be taken to the Tatars! And Papa — that is, *Count* von Schimmelhorn — and I shall show them that it is no empty threat!"

Latin is a splendid tongue for

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such pronouncements, and the general was tremendously impressive. A few timid voices of protest sputtered and went out. Suddenly, a new spirit seemed to animate the room. There were wild cheers, from the Hungarians especially, and a ferocious clash of arms.

"Good!" growled the Lord Koloman. "It is better to have a plan than to have none. It is better to act against the Tatars than wait for them to slay us! Highness, let *me* carry your message to them."

"Lord Koloman," said Thorfinn, "let us wait until tomorrow. Word will reach Prince Batu and Subutai soon enough, be assured of it! Everyone has already seen the magic horse appear in our midst, and vanish with the Lady Ermintrude, and bring her back again with the cart and my sworn brother, and Their Highnesses, and His Highness' officer, and the lovely Lady Bluebelle. These wonders have without a doubt already been reported to our enemies. Now we need only boast to everyone about the armies the prince is bringing to our aid. If I mistake not, they will send ambassadors to us. What do you think, Count Rudolf?"

The count nodded. "I agree," he said. "And we would do well to parley with them here or in the open field, rather than in their camp, where they can prepare all manner of treacheries. We shall wait. And now —" He clapped his hands for servants. "— let us drink and talk of less weighty matters."

The ladies were escorted in, Camellia Jo Pollard bubbling with excitement at being treated as a Princess Palatine, Ermintrude eager to rejoin her great magician, and the Lady Bluebelle, now decked out in some of Mrs. Pollard's gaudier baubles, glowing with a full-blooded vitality which brought an instant cry of admiration from Thorfinn Thorfinnson.

Bluebelle nudged Papa Schimmelhorn playfully. "Hey," she said, "that big Scandahoovian's a chunk of real male man, Pop. Lookit them muscles. What dja say his name was?"

"It iss Thorfinn Thorfinnson," replied Papa Schimmelhorn. "He iss a baron."

Never taking his eyes off Bluebelle, Thorfinn uttered a string of excited words in Old Norse.

"Say, what's *that* all about?" she asked.

"Ho-ho-ho! He iss talking about you, Frau Bluebelle. He says he likes you because you haff a big behind, und together you und he vould make shtrong sons!"

Bluebelle simpered modestly. "You tell the lunk with a big Swede like him it might be sorta fun," she said, and blushed a shocking pink.

And, when Papa Schimmelhorn

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passed the word along, Thorfinn roared happily and swelled his chest until it almost burst his surcoat. Then he and Bluebelle, properly chaperoned by a serving woman, drifted away towards the battlements; and Ermintrude, hustling her magician to a cozy corner, cuddled up to him and demanded that he tell her all that had transpired and how soon he and the prince would chase away the Tatars.

There was much serious discussion before night fell, for Count Rudolf and Thorfinn, the archbishop and Lord Koloman were all agreed that every contingency must be anticipated. To them, the general demonstrated his binoculars, which were then entrusted to a picked paladin who was to watch for any movement by the enemy. Sergeant Leatherbee reported that no attempt had been made by anyone against the time-pony and its cart, and that the knights assigned to guard duty by Thorfinn were still at their posts. Then, under Papa Schimmelhorn's instructions, pony, cart, and all were ceremoniously borne upstairs to the great chamber assigned to him, adjoining that with which the Pollards had been honored, both of which the count normally reserved for visiting royalty.

At the general's polite request, conveyed by the Archbishop, they were left alone.

General Pollard sat down heavily and mopped his brow. "Papa," he said, "I never realized that saving Europe from the Mongols would present so many problems."

"Don't vorry, soldier boy," laughed Papa Schimmelhorn. "Thorfinn Thorfinnson knows all about die Mongols, und now he iss in luff vith Bluebelle, so eferything vill vork out fine."

"Bluebelle Bottomley and her amours," said the general stiffly, "have nothing to do with the military problems facing us. If we are indeed to take Mongol representatives on a time tour of the world's finest cavalry, I will have to plan our itinerary very carefully. We must show them the best Western cavalry in battle, not merely on parade."

"Maybe der Lidtle Big Horn und General Custard?" suggested Papa Schimmelhorn helpfully.

"That is *not* precisely what I had in mind." The general sniffed. "We must produce a tremendous impact on their minds, so that they will have no doubt of our superiority! I have several battles picked which should do very nicely, but you said you have to have the exact latitude and longitude, to say nothing of the date and time and maps of the terrain, and I simply

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don't have the necessary data with me."

"Dot's okay. Ve. Ve chust chump on der time-pony und go home, und you can look up eferything, und ve come back chust vhen ve haff shtarted, like before. No vun vill know except der sergeant, und lidtle Ermintrude. I ask her if maybe she vants to take a ride."

The general grumbled that the matter was too serious; that they could afford no such distractions. But Papa Schimmelhorn tempted him successfully. "Soldier boy," he said, "I tell you — this time you can ride der pony. Iss time you learn how, und I vill show you. Ermintrude und I, ve ride back in der cart together."

In a few minutes he returned with the Lady Ermintrude who seemed delighted at the prospect. Then he cautioned the general against touching the controls, inserted a small part of the mechanism he had removed as a precaution against monkey business, and they were off. Though it is hard to measure time spent in time travel, it was long enough for the couple in the cart to improve their already close acquaintance and for the general to get a heady taste of the joys of time riding. When they materialized again inside the stable, his earlier sulkiness had vanished, and he not only opened the door of the house to them, but invited them to help themselves to refreshments. As he strode off to his study whistling *Garry Owen,* Papa Schimmelhorn promptly picked up Ermintrude in his brawny arms, allowed her to balance a small case of ale on his shoulder, and disappeared with her up the stairs.

It took the general more than an hour to finish his researches, and then he spent another twenty minutes confirming the precise details with the Pentagon by telephone. When everything was ready, he had four dates and places: June 18, 1815, *Waterloo;* October 25, 1854, *Balaclava;* June 9, 1863, *Brandy Station, Virginia;* and September 2, 1898, *Omdurman, Sudan.* He also had detailed topographic maps of each locality and diagrams of the momentous actions fought there.

Ermintrude was rumpled and radiant, and Papa Schimmelhorn, equally rumpled, looked as though he had just eaten a plump canary, but General Pollard scarcely noticed them. "I must ride this horse more often, Papa!" he exclaimed, vaulting to the saddle. "It's wonderful! It's just like steeplechasing!"

"Chust don't touch die dinguses," warned Papa Schimmelhorn. "Only pump die pedals."

They came back safely only a

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few second after leaving Drachendonnerfels, and Ermintrude, kissing her magician, went off to tidy up. The general was elated. "I hope those Mongols send us somebody who really *understands* the science of war!" he exclaimed. Then he settled down to showing Papa Schimmelhorn exactly where and when they'd have to go next day, making precise sketches so that they might observe without running too great a risk of getting shot or speared or sabered, and speculating on the psychological shock the Mongol emissaries were certain to receive.

They retired soon after dark, Papa Schimmelhorn to pleasant dreams of pretty pussycats, the general to fantastic rides on hitherto undreamed-of beasts, heroic battles against terrible foes, and ponderous histories in which his name and fame were indelibly recorded. They both were wakened shortly after dawn by Thorfinn Thorfinnson and Sergeant Leatherbee.

"The Tatars have arrived!" Thorfinn announced.

"The goddamn gooks are here! declared the sergeant.

The Mongols had indeed arrived. Though they remained at a respectful distance from those outer defenses of Drachendonnerfels that denied the waist of its peninsula to mainland assailants, their numbers seemed overwhelming, and even General Pollard, at first sight of them, was awed. Each *tuman* consisted of ten thousand men, and there must have been nearly a dozen *tumans.* In addition, at some distanee a mighty camp had been established, with its vast wagons and huge felt tents, its herds and picket lines and cooking fires.

"What will they do now?" asked the general.

"Baron Thorfinn says that they will wait," answered the archbishop, "and then they will do their best to frighten us. As for me, I must confess that they have frightened me already."

The Mongols waited. They engaged in martial exercises and displays of horsemanship. Not until noon did their emissaries appear — a group of three men slowly and solemnly making their way toward the causeway.

Count Rudolf, the Prior of the Templars, and a Magyar who could speak the Mongol tongue rode out to meet them.

The Mongol spokesman demanded the instant surrender of the castle and all within it, including the magician and his magic horse.

Count Rudolf refused bluntly even to speak to him, for he was merely a commander of a regiment, unqualified to treat with princes.

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Negotiations were broken off, and there were more warlike demonstrations. Then another deputation sallied forth, and this time it was headed by the commander of a *tuman,* and included a nephew of Prince Batu's. Count Rudolf arrogantly conveyed the haughty message from the Prince Palatine of Washington and the Potomac, and the deputation went back with it.

An hour later, Prince Batu's nephew returned alone. His uncle, he declared, would send a group of three to ride the magic horse and cart to the lands of the strange prince and see whether he spoke the truth. They would meet halfway between the castle and the horde. Then, if they failed to return, or if, returning, they said that he had lied, Drachendonnerfels would be stormed and leveled to the ground, and every living creature in it cruelly slain.

The effect of all this on Papa Schimmelhorn was by no means salutary. He told the general that he would much prefer to go back when they came from, where a man could spend his time chasing pretty pussycats in peace and plenty; and the argument that he would be leaving Western Civilization in the lurch left him completely cold. It was only when Ermintrude interceded physically that finally he agreed.

General Pollard and Sergeant Leatherbee armed themselves. So, after bidding Bluebelle an emotional farewell, did Thorfinn Thorfinnson. In the distance, they could see their Mongol counterparts already starting out. With a fanfare of braying trumpets the castle's sally port opened for them. A mounted party of the garrison stood ready to dash out and rescue them if necessary.

"Wait until we are perhaps twenty yards apart," ordered the general, "then appear between us with the horse and cart."

"Okay, soldier boy," replied Papa Schimmelhorn, not very happily.

General Pollard and Thorfin Thorfinnson rode forward resolutely, Sergeant Leatherbee a horselength to the rear and beside him a man-at-arms to act as horse holder. The four Mongols approached in a similar formation. As the space between the parties narrowed, there was no attempt to attack them or to interfere.

The general saw that the elder of the leading Mongols was a man probably in his sixties, a man taller than the average of his countrymen, still lean and hard as nails, helmeted and armored in steel and lacquered leather, and plainly garbed after the Mongol fashion, but carrying a gilt and jeweled scimitar of Persian workmanship.

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At that instant, Thorfinn seized his arm. *"Look!"* he hissed. *"It is Subutai himself!"*

General Pollard did not understand the language, but he was thoroughly familiar with the name. A thrill went through him at the thought of meeting a commander who actually had ridden, conquering, from the deserts of Mongolia to the Danube, from India to northernmost Muscovy — a thrill accompanied by some misgivings. He realized, with a momentary chill, that it would take great cavalry indeed to appear impressive to those uncompromising basalt eyes.

Subutai's companion was much younger, similarly accoutered but bearing also a bow and two full quivers; and he was followed by a broad man with Eastern eyes and an Assyrian nose, who in turn was attended by an ordinary soldier.

Then, on the dot, Papa Schimmelhorn materialized the time-pony and its cart. "Here ve are, soldier boy!" he cried, and waved in the friendliest way imaginable to Subutai, who did not wave back.

The Mongols now approached more cautiously. They circled the time-pony. They regarded their soon-to-be fellow time-tourists stonily. Then cold introductions were exchanged. The younger Mongol was another relative of Batu's, and the man with the Assyrian nose was an officer of uncertain origin who had some knowledge of Latin.

"We are honored," said General Pollard, "that the famous *orlok* Subutai should show his trust in us by coming personally to view the power of our arms."

Subutai answered curtly that there was no question of trust involved, for the world knew what happened to those stupid enough to betray the Mongols. "If your arms are indeed as mighty as you say," he declared, "then it is proper that I myself should judge them, and not an officer of less experience. If they are not —" He gestured at the horde behind him.

Then each party dismounted, handing their reins to the horse holders. Courteously, the general bowed to Subutai, indicating that he should step first into the pony cart; then he followed, and the two commanders sat down side by side. Thorfinn and the younger Mongol moved up next to them, and finally the man with the Assyrian nose squeezed in with Sergeant Leatherbee. It was a tight fit all around, and the pony cart's feeble springs protested dismally.

"To Waterloo!" the General's voice rang out.

And, "Off ve go!" shouted Papa Schimmelhorn, leaning forward and pumping vigorously.

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They wavered; they were surrounded by the pearly shimmer; their Mongol guests, too disciplined to show any signs of fear, still glanced around them apprehensively.

Then the world formed again around them, a green world full of the memories of recent rain — and of thunder, thunder in the far sky, and closer thunder from the massed guns of the two armies contending in the valley to the south.

General Pollard had picked their place and time with precision. It was perhaps two o'clock, and d'Erlon's infantry divisions, moving forward in their dense phalanxes, had crushed through the defenders of Papelotte and La Haye, had scattered a Dutch-Belgian brigade to the four winds, and were advancing on the crest, where Picton's infantry were poised to spring.

Now Subutai's interest really was aroused. "We ourselves used such thunder-engines at Kai-feng-fu," he commented, "but never in such number or with such effect."

Through his binoculars, the general saw Picton's counterstroke, and he saw Picton die. Then he saw what he had come to see: the great charge of the two brigades of heavy cavalry, the Union Brigade consisting of the Royal Dragoons, the Iniskillings, and the Royal Scots Greys, and the Household Brigade of the Life Guards, the King's Dragoon Guards, and the Blues. They thundered down against the infantry, against the French cavalry supporting d'Erlon's men. They carried everything before them; and then, ignoring their own trumpeters blowing recall, swept on across the valley, into the very teeth of Napoleon's masses — where they were cut to pieces.

General Pollard had shared his binoculars with Subutai. "Well, sir!" he cried out. "What do you think of *that?*"

"At first," replied the conqueror of Muscovy, "I thought that they did well. But they seem to have little sense or discipline. They should have reformed and withdrawn immediately, for thus they would have lost almost no men at all, and could have done many more great deeds. Besides, their horses are very big and fat and sleek. Probably they cannot fend for themselves and must be fed like children, and I doubt whether they can endure hardship any better than the horses of the Teutons and the Poles."

This brief critique lost nothing in the translation, but it failed to dismay German Pollard. He announced that they would move on to another area of the field and gave the word to Papa Schimmelhorn to skip ahead an hour or so.

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When they reappeared, Marshall Ney had just launched his massed squadrons against the British line, charging over muddy ground against double-shotted guns and rocklike squares of British infantry. They watched the squadrons charge and crumble, and charge again and die; and the general, almost whinnying in his excitement, exclaimed that if only *he* had held command, there would have been a very different tale to tell!

Subutai's opinion of poor Ney was by no means complimentary. "Never," he asserted, "have I seen a commander with such a genius for slaying his own men. Prince from the West, you will have to show me better sights than these to impress me; so far, even with the thunder-engines, I have seen nothing that frightens me and no forces with whom we could not cope according to our way of waging war."

At that point, they were themselves assailed by a small party of mounted stragglers, who looked like half-trained Brunswickers and who were speedily discouraged by two arrows from the younger Mongol's bow, a few accurate shots from the sergeant's .45, and one swift slicing cut of Thorfinn's sword. Four of them remained on the ground, two rode off howling with their fellows, and Sergeant Latherbee got himself an excellent long sabre and a dragoon helmet as souvenirs.

The incident put Subutai into a better humor, and when the time-pony whisked them to Balaclava, he actually watched the charge of Sir James Scarlett's Heavy Brigade — composed of the same regiments which had formed the Union Brigade at Waterloo — with approval, commenting that its commander at least was a man of resolution and not an idiot. The Charge of the Light Brigade, however, undid it all, and he made it clear that, had Lord Cardigan only been a Mongol, he would have suffered a very painful fate indeed.

General Pollard was disheartened. He pointed out to Subutai that poor leadership did not diminish the sterling qualities of the troops concerned who, under more competent command — his own, for instance — could be expected to accomplish any number of military miracles.

Subutai replied, pleasantly enough, that he doubted it.

The next stop was Brandy Station, the largest cavalry action of the Civil War, and for a while the general thought that at last he was beginning to get his message through, for Subutai watched the charges and countercharges with mounting interest, until finally the Federal cavalry, having failed to take Stuart and his headquarters,

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withdrew. Then the *orlok's* critique dispelled his optimism, for Subutai was most interested in the small thunder-engines which so many of the troopers had, like Sergeant Leatherbee, carried in one hand. To the Prince from the West, the prospect of saving Western Civilization from the Mongols began to seem pretty dim.

Discreetly, he took counsel with Count von Schimmelhorn. "I just don't understand the man," he said. "I've shown him some of the finest Western cavalry in action, and he's not at all impressed. We'll just have to try once again. We'll move on to Omdurman, and he can watch the British charging through the whole dervish army. However, I must admit that I don't want to have to listen to his comments while we're going there. Papa, if you don't mind, this time I'd like to ride the pony."

"Okay, soldier boy," said Papa Schimmelhorn, feeling genuinely sorry for his friend. "Only remember — chust die pedals, und leafe alone die dinguses."

He waited while the general mounted and then joined the party in the pony cart, barely managing to squeeze himself in next to his sworn brother who, fired with the lust for battle, was grumbling because so many splendid opportunities had gone to waste. He winked at Subutai. "Pretty soon, Herr Mongol," he promised, "ve show you something maybe you don't forget."

The general started pedaling. The pearly shimmer enfolded them, and moments passed. Then abruptly the fierce, hot sun beat down, a furnace wind blew, shots and shouts and wild screams surrounded them, and they were on the field of Omdurman.

The general's map work had been as accurate as before, and Papa Schimmelhorn's adjustment of the dinguses quite as precise — but Omdurman was not a battle according to the rules. Where, according to the histories, there should have been no one, there was a mob of howling dervishes. Two of them instantly dashed at the general with their swords; two or three more did their utmost to impale him with their spears — and General Pollard reacted instinctively. He drove his spurs into the time-pony's flanks and reined — or tried to rein — abruptly to the left. Instantly, the battle vanished; the pearly shimmer quavered on and off, flickering and hesitating; the time-pony emitted a dry, whickering sound.

"Gott in Himmel!" shouted Papa Schimmelhorn. *"Soldier boy, vot haff you done?"*

Then they were in a different place and time. Night was almost on them; no sun stood in the

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gray-black sky, and an icy rain was falling. Clearly, there was a war on, but it was a war far removed from the Sudan. In the distance, there was the growling of artillery, the roar of detonating bombs. The threatening drone of piston-engined aircraft sounded in the skies.

The time-pony and its cart rested on torn mud, behind a thick hedge that screened them from the road. A number of dead Germans lay nearby; a little further off were some dead Americans and one or two who, by their helmets, could have been British or Canadian.

The younger Mongols had their swords half drawn; so had Thorfinn Thorfinnson. Subutai, recognizing that something unanticipated had occurred, sat tense as a drawn bow.

"Hey, General, sir!" called out Sergeant Leatherbee. "It sure looks like we're back in France, round about '44."

The general had dismounted. He was staring fearfully at the time-pony's scarred wooden flanks, where his spurs had pentrated to its mechanism. The realities of his situation were just beginning to seep through to him, and they were by no means pleasant ones. Here he was a five-star general, at a time when he had been only a lieutenant colonel. Furthermore, he was standing in a war zone with a party of unauthorized and very extraordinary aliens, when officially, passed over for promotion, he was actually provost marshal at Fort Kit Carson, Oklahoma. Finally, not only would there be no cavalry with which to impress Subutai, but there was a distinct possibility that Subutai and all of them might be permanently stuck there in the Twentieth Century, while in the Thirteenth the Mongols would overrun the rest of Europe. Unhappily, he realized that the War Department might reasonably be expected to take a dim view of the whole affair.

"Papa," he pleaded, with a thread of desperation in his voice, "you — you *can* fix it, can't you?"

Papa Schimmelhorn shook his head sadly. "Soldier boy, I do not know until I look inside." He opened up the tool kit and took out a screwdriver and a pair of pliers. "Anyhow I try."

As he set to work, General Pollard pulled himself together and surveyed the situation. From not too far away came the ominous roar of heavy internal combustion engines and the unmistakable earth-shaking rumble of tracked vehicles. Decisive action obviously was called for, starting with protective coloration.

"Sergeant," he ordered, "collect enough helmets from those casualties for our entire party. Be sure to get one or two of the British ones." Then, fumbling for his

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Latin, he explained that here his own people were at war, that behind their lines they were intolerant of strangers and might be in no mood to wait for explanations, and that prudence required that everybody be as inconspicuous as possible.

With Thorfinn's help, the sergeant gathered up the helmets and issued them. He also passed out two rifles and a couple of pistol belts. The result, while not too convincing, was at least an improvement. Meanwhile, the sound of engines swelled, and a squadron of light tanks roared past along the road without catching sight of them.

"Are you making progress, Papa?" asked General Pollard anxiously.

"I haff found der piece you broke," replied Papa Schimmelhorn, "und maybe I can fix. But I must haff a longer shcrewdrifer und some friction tape."

Half a dozen attack aircraft, flying in the same direction as the squadron of light tanks, screamed unseen overhead.

"Sergeant Leatherbee!" shouted the general. "We must get a long screwdriver and some friction tape! Where can we obtain them?"

There was the grumble of even heavier engines coming towards them on the road.

"I don't know, sir!" the sergeant shouted back. "Unless mebbe we could borry some from one of them tanks been passin' by!"

General Pollard was violently opposed to tanks and their employment, and he recoiled even from the idea of borrowing tools from one of them, but he was too great a man to indulge his prejudices in this emergency.

"Very well," he said. "Let's stand out on the road."

They pushed their way through the wet hedge with difficulty and found another armored column coming at them so rapidly that the general did not even notice that Subutai and Thorfinn Thorfinnson had followed them.

Bravely, he stepped out into the road, and held up his right hand. At first, the leading tank seemed sure to run him down, but he stood his ground. Then, with grinding gears and clashing tracks, it slowed and halted. In its turret stood an extremely angry officer.

"YOU GODDAMN IDIOT!" he roared. *"What the goddamn hell do you think you're —"* He broke off. He peered intently through the gloom at General Pollard's equine countenance, at the five stars on his helmet.

"POLLY!" yelled George S. Patton, Jr. *"Jesus Christ, what won't they think of next?* I never thought I'd see the day when you'd *outrank* me!"

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He saluted, and General Pollard returned the salute with precision.

"What the hell are you doing out here, Polly?" Patton asked, shaking his head unbelievingly, and staring at Subutai, now decked out in a U.S. issue helmet and pistol belt. "Who's this you've got with you — Genghis Khan?"

General Pollard suddenly had a hideous vision of George S. Patton seeing the time-pony and its wicker pony cart and meeting Papa Schimmelhorn. "I'm on a secret mission, George!" he snapped. "A mission of the utmost urgency, with — with our allies. Our vehicle has broken down, and we require a long screwdriver and some friction tape. With these we can make our own repairs."

Patton regarded them suspiciously. "Looks mighty queer to me," he said, and hesitated. Then, "By God, isn't that Leatherbee?" he asked.

Sergeant Leatherbee snapped to attention. "Sure good to see you, sir, and with your three stars!"

"And I'm glad to see that you've made master, Leatherbee." Patton laughed, looking at his stripes. "Never thought you would, not with all those 35-1440's. Well, with you around I guess everything's okay. Take good care of your general, Sergeant!"

Someone inside the tank handed up a long screwdriver and a roll of friction tape. General Patton handed them to the sergeant. He saluted General Pollard once again. The tank's engine roared. They stepped aside.

As the long grim column thundered past them, Subutai simply stood there watching it in silence. Only after the last tank had disappeared did he follow Sergeant Leatherbee back to the time-pony.

They sat there in the rain while Papa Schimmelhorn made his repairs, and Subutai asked General Pollard several questions in a much more respectful tone than he had used before. Was the great cart made of solid steel? He was informed it was. And did the great cart carry thunder-engines? It did. And could it move without men or horses? It could. And did the prince's army have many more of them? The prince's army had many thousands.

Then Subutai said something which shocked General Pollard to the core. "If we had carts like those," he said, "we would not need horses."

He also asked whether the fact that the officer to whom the prince had spoken had only three stars on his helmet betokened lower rank, and was informed it did. He closed his eyes and for several minutes was wrapped in silent thought. Then, very calmly, "Prince from the

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West," he said. "You have succeeded. We shall go back into Asia, and we shall not return."

"It is well," said General Pollard haughtily, sensibly suppressing the impulse to tell Subutai that tanks were inefficient, unintelligent, incapable of reproducing their own kind, and useless for such purposes as playing polo and hunting foxes.

Now that everything was settled, Sergeant Leatherbee broke out a bottle of the general's bourbon, and by the time Papa Schimmelhorn's repairs had been effected, the atmosphere was quite convivial. On the return trip, however, it was the magician rather than the prince who rode the time-pony, after setting the controls so that they would return, not at the instant of their departure — which might have persuaded the Mongols that the whole thing had been a delusion — but after an interval of at least ten hours.

They materialized where they had started and found stately deputations from both sides awaiting them. Then Subutai's decision was formally announced, and the farewells which were said were, if not exactly friendly, at least respectful. Subutai presented General Pollard with his jeweled scimitar, as an expression of his esteem. The general, in return, gave the Mongol his binoculars (which were destined, some hundreds of years later, to shatter the mental balance of a Soviet archaeologist who happened to be digging into a mound in Central Asia). And Papa Schimmelhorn generously sent Prince Batu a cuckoo clock, which impressed everybody even more than the magic horse had done.

Within a few hours the Mongol horde had vanished, and Count Rudolf — though urging caution in view of the long record of Tatar treachery — announced that festivities would begin on the morrow and urged his guests to stay on at least for a few days, until the rescue of Christendom could be confirmed with greater certainty.

That night they feasted merrily, and Mrs. Pollard, who had been seriously concerned about her husband, played her role of the proud princess beautifully, even though she did confess to the general that she was getting rather tired of the Thirteenth Century's lack of sanitary facilities. Thorfinn Thorfinnson rose with the ale to deliver an impassioned account of his sworn brother's cleverness and the Prince Palatine's heroism, and to praise them both not only for saving Christendom, but for bringing Drachendonnerfels its fairest flower, at which Bluebelle blushed delicately. He then promised to compose a truly heroic

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saga telling the whole story, including all the battles and their carnage, and even Sergeant Leatherbee's generous issue of the general's whiskey.

Finally they went to bed, and presently a serving woman came tiptoeing in to Papa Schimmelhorn and whispered to him to be as quiet as a mouse and led him through a secret passage to Ermintrude's chamber.

At the count's insistence (and at Ermintrude's) they remained at Drachendonnerfels five days, while swift messengers reported the ebbing of the Mongol tide from all those European countries they had ravaged and occupied; and each day more and more grandees, of both Church and State, came to the castle to pay their respects to their great rescuers; and every night the serving woman came tiptoeing into Papa Schimmelhorn's bedchamber to lead him to his pretty pussycat.

Actually, the festivities might have been prolonged indefinitely if the great magician had not boasted to the Prince Palatine of the reward he was receiving — which was tactless of him because the prince himself was never allowed out of Mrs. Pollard's sight. As a matter of fact, she had been getting a little irritable. On the third day Thorfinn Thorfinnson had very formally asked the prince for Bluebelle's hand, and the prince has passed the buck to her. She, of course, had asked Bluebelle, who had said, "Look, Mrs. P., it ain't that I don't wanta cook fer yer. You and the gen'ral been real swell to me. But if I stay back here and marry that big Swede, hell, I won't be just nobody — I'll be a baroness. It'll be me tellin' the hired hands what to do. Besides, it's like he says, I got good teeth, and betwixt the two of us we oughta have some real fine sons, if we work at it — and I gotta hunch we will." She blushed again. "And someday we'll have a castle of our own, and — hell, Mrs. P., it ain't all that bad. I was raised with a three-holer back on the farm."

So Mrs. Pollard dissolved in tears and embraced her and did her best to forget that she was going to have an awful time trying to find another cook and gave her all her costume jewelry and a genuine small sapphire as a wedding present.

The marriage was solemnly celebrated next day by the Archbishop Alberic, who waived the ordinary posting of the banns in view of the high rank of the participants; and Papa Schimmelhorn, who as the groom's sworn brother acted as best man, presented them with his one remaining cuckoo clock to hang over their nuptial couch.

At Mrs. Pollard's insistence —

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she told the general that she had actually picked up some *fleas* — they left the following day, after Papa Schimmelhorn had promised Ermintrude that he would return as soon as possible. They were allowed to leave only after many speeches had been made, countless toasts offered, and innumerable rich gifts pressed upon them.

Then, in the great hall where Mrs. Pollard first had appeared on the magic horse, they bade their farewells. Papa Schimmelhorn kissed Ermintrude and mounted to the saddle. Mrs. Pollard waved Bluebelle a wet good-by. The general and Sergeant Leatherbee saluted and clicked their heels. There was a great ringing cheer from the assembled multitude —

And then they were back between the stalls in the Pollard stable.

"Well," remarked the general, "things didn't go quite the way I would've liked them to, but at least I saw Waterloo and Balaclava and Brandy Station — and after all I did save Western Civilization from the Mongols."

"I must say it's nice to be home again," said Mrs. Pollard, "with hot water and a lovely shower just waiting for me!"

Mrs. Leatherbee met them at the side door. She regarded them disapprovingly as they walked in. "Where've you been, Leatherbee?" she demanded. "You went off with the general, and so I guess you didn't get into no real trouble like that time over to Fort Myers. But you might have told me that you were going to be gone two whole days. I was about ready to call the police."

"*Two days?*" exclaimed Papa Schimmelhorn. "Ve haff been gone *two days?*"

"That's right," said Mrs. Leatherbee, "and that poor old lady here waiting for you since breakfast time. Worried sick, I wouldn't wonder, though she has tried not to show it."

Suddenly Papa Schimmelhorn realized that possibly his extemporized repairs to the time-pony might not have been as thorough as he thought — at least in movement from the past into the present. "Und vhere iss die old lady?" he asked in a small voice.

"She was sitting right here by the window just a little bit ago," said Mrs. Leatherbee. "I reckon the poor dear had been watching for you. I wonder where she got to?"

Papa Schimmelhorn experienced a dreadful sinking feeling. "Soldier boy," he said, "I think maybe ve better go out to der stable und make sure about der time machine."

The general nodded somberly, and they went out together.

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They went into the stable.

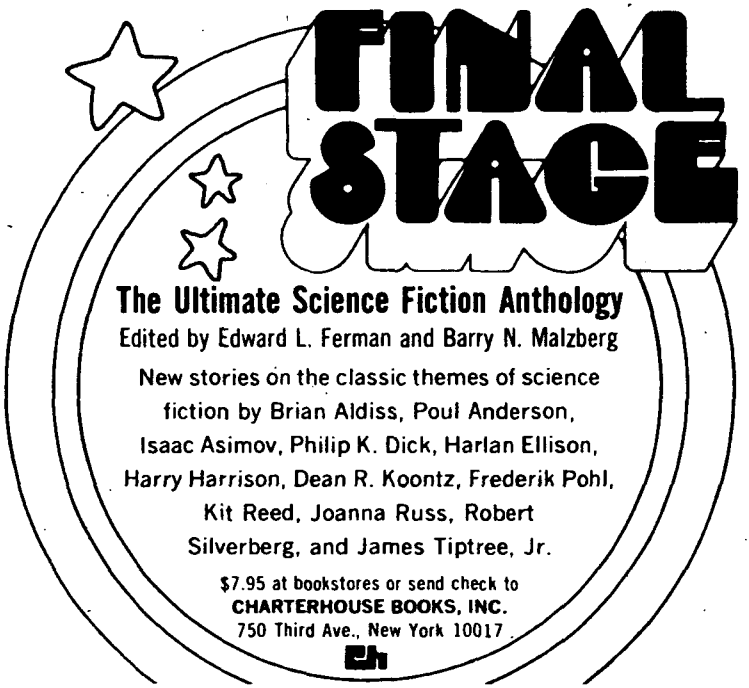
The time-pony and its cart had vanished.

There was no one there except Mama Schimmelhorn, and she was feeding sugar to the horses.

"Mama!" cried Papa Schimmelhorn. "Vhere iss my lidtle time machine?"

Mama Schimmelhorn smiled, and her smile reminded her husband, not too subtly, of the Mongol Conquest.

"I push die dinguses," she said, "und then it vent avay. But do not vorry. Inshtead, ve buy der general a shtand for his umbrella in der hall."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This 25th year for F&SF is a big one for Harlan Ellison, as well. Thus far in 1974 he has won the Hollywood Writers Guild Award for Most Outstanding Teleplay, won an Edgar award for Best Mystery Story of 1973 from the Mystery Writers of America, and as this appears on the newsstands his March 1973 F&SF novella, "The Deathbird," will be vying for a Hugo at the World SF Convention. And of the *very* special 25th Anniversary novelet that appears below, Harlan has this to say: "It's taken me 2½ years to write this story, one of the most difficult I've ever attempted. In it, I try to fuse elements of reality and fantasy, past and present and future, in a way that will lead readers from the possible to the implausible to the impossible without any jet-lag. It's a mystery story, in a way, and those familiar with cinema lore will have the significant clues by page three."

Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans: Latitude 38° 54′ N, Longitude 77°00′ 13″ W

by HARLAN ELLISON

As Moby Dick awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself changed in his bed to kelp into a monstrous Ahab.

Crawling in stages from the soggy womb of sheets, he stumbled into the kitchen and ran water into the teapot. There was lye in the corner of each eye. He put his head under the spigot and let the cold water rush around his cheeks.

Dead bottles littered the living room. One hundred and eleven empty bottles that had contained Robitussin and Romilar-CF. He padded through the debris to the front door and opened it a crack.

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Daylight assaulted him. "Oh, God," he murmured, and closed his eyes to pick up the folded newspaper from the stoop.

Once more in dusk, he opened the paper. The headline read: BOLIVIAN AMBASSADOR FOUND MURDERED, and the feature story heading column one detailed the discovery of the ambassador's body, badly decomposed, in an abandoned refrigerator in an empty lot in Secaucus, New Jersey.

The teapot whistled.

Naked, he padded toward the kitchen; as he passed the aquarium he saw that terrible fish was still alive, and this morning whistling

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like a bluejay, making tiny streams of bubbles that rose to burst on the scummy surface of the water. He paused beside the tank, turned on the light and looked in through the drifting eddies of stringered algae. The fish simply would not die. It had killed off every other fish in the tank — prettier fish, friendlier fish, livelier fish, even larger and more dangerous fish—had killed them all one by one, and eaten out the eyes. Now it swam the tank alone, ruler of its worthless domain.

He had tried to let the fish kill itself, trying every form of neglect short of outright murder by not feeding it; but the pale, worm-pink devil even thrived in the dark and filth-laden waters.

Now it sang like a bluejay. He hated the fish with a passion he could barely contain.

He sprinkled flakes from a plastic container, grinding them between thumb and forefinger as experts had advised him to do it, and watched the multi-colored granules of fish meal, roe, milt, brine shrimp, day-fly eggs, oatflour and egg yolk ride on the surface for a moment before the detestable fish-face came snapping to the top to suck them down. He turned away, cursing and hating the fish. It would not die. Like him, it would not die.

In the kitchen, bent over the boiling water, he understood for the first time the true status of his situation. Though he was probably nowhere near the rotting outer edge of sanity, he could smell its foulness on the wind, coming in from the horizon; and like some wild animal rolling its eyes at the scent of carrion and the feeders thereon, he was being driven closer to lunacy every day, just from the smell.

He carried the teapot, a cup and two tea bags to the kitchen table and sat down. Propped open in a plastic stand used for keeping cookbooks handy while mixing ingredients, the Mayan Codex translations remained unread from the evening before. He poured the water, dangled the tea bags in the cup, and tried to focus his attention. The references to Itzamna, the chief divinity of the Maya pantheon, and medicine, his chief sphere of influence, blurred. Ixtab, the goddess of suicide, seemed more apropos for this morning, this deadly terrible morning. He tried reading, but the words only went in, nothing happened to them, they didn't sing. He sipped tea and found himself thinking of the chill, full circle of the Moon. He glanced over his shoulder at the kitchen clock. Seven forty-four.

He shoved away from the table, taking the half-full cup of tea, and went into the bedroom. The impression of his body, where it had lain in tortured sleep, still indented the bed. There were clumps of blood-matted hair clinging to the manacles that he had riveted to metal plates in the headboard. He rubbed his wrists

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where they had been scored raw, slopping a little tea on his left forearm. He wondered if the Bolivian ambassador had been a piece of work he had tended to the month before.

His wrist watch lay on the bureau. He checked it. Seven forty-six. Slightly less than an hour and a quarter to make the meeting with the consultation service. He went into the bathroom, reached inside the shower stall and turned the handle till a fine needle-spray of icy water smashed the tiled wall of the stall. Letting the water run, he turned to the medicine cabinet for his shampoo. Taped to the mirror was an Ouchless Telfa finger bandage on which three lines had been neatly typed, in capitals:

THE WAY YOU WALK IS
THORNY, MY SON, THROUGH
NO FAULT OF YOUR OWN.

Then, opening the cabinet, removing a plastic bottle of herbal shampoo that smelled like friendly, deep forests, Lawrence Talbot resigned himself to the situation, turned and stepped into the shower, the merciless ice-laden waters of the Arctic pounding against his tortured flesh.

Suite 1544 of the Tishman Airport Center Building was a men's toilet. He stood against the wall opposite the door labeled MEN and drew the envelope from the inner breast pocket of his jacket. The paper was of good quality, the envelope crackled as he thumbed up the flap and withdrew the single sheet letter inside. It was the correct address, the correct floor, the correct suite. Suite 1544 was a men's toilet, nonetheless. Talbot started to turn away. It was a vicious joke; he found no humor in the situation; not in his present circumstances.

He took one step toward the elevators.

The door to the men's room shimmered, fogged over like a windshield in winter, and reformed. The legend on the door had changed. It now read:

INFORMATION ASSOCIATES

Suite 1544 was the consultation service that had written the invitational letter on paper of good quality in response to Talbot's mail inquiry responding to a noncommittal but judiciously-phrased advertisement in *Forbes*.

He opened the door and stepped inside. The woman behind the teak reception desk smiled at him, and his glance was split between the dimples that formed and her legs, very nice, smooth legs, crossed and framed by the kneehole of the desk. "Mr. Talbot?"

He nodded. "Lawrence Talbot."

She smiled again. "Mr. Demeter will see you at once, sir. Would you like something to drink? Coffee? A soft drink?"

Talbot found himself touching his jacket where the envelope lay in an inner pocket. "No. Thank you."

She stood up, moving toward

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an inner office door, as Talbot said, "What do you do when someone tries to flush your desk?" He was not trying to be cute. He was annoyed. She turned and stared at him. There was silence in her appraisal, nothing more.

"Mr. Demeter is right through here, sir."

She opened the door and stood aside. Talbot walked past her, catching a scent of mimosa.

The inner office was furnished like the reading room of an exclusive men's club. Old money. Deep quiet. Dark, heavy woods. A lowered ceiling of acoustical tile on tracks, concealing a crawl space and probably electrical conduits. The pile rug of oranges and burnt umbers swallowed his feet to the ankles. Through a wall-sized window could be seen not the city that lay outside the building, but a panoramic view of Hanauma Bay, on the Koko Head side of Oahu. The pure aquamarine waves came in like undulant snakes, rose like cobras, crested out white, tunneled, and struck like asps at the blazing yellow beach. It was not a window; there were no windows in the office. It was a photograph. A deep, real photograph that was neither a projection nor a hologram. It was a wall looking out on another place entirely. Talbot knew nothing about exotic flora, but he was certain that the tall, razor-edge-leafed trees growing right down to beach's boundary were identical to those pictured in books depicting the Carboniferous period of the Earth before even the saurians had walked the land. What he was seeing had been gone for a very long time.

"Mr. Talbot. Good of you to come. John Demeter."

He came up from a wingback chair, extended his hand. Talbot took it. The grip was firm and cool. "Won't you sit down," Demeter said. "Something to drink? Coffee, perhaps, or a soft drink?" Talbot shook his head: Demeter nodded dismissal to the receptionist; she closed the door behind her, firmly, smoothly, silently.

Talbot studied Demeter in one long appraisal as he took the chair opposite the wingback. Demeter was in his early fifties, had retained a full and rich mop of hair that fell across his forehead in gray waves that clearly had not been touched up. His eyes were clear and blue, his features regular and jovial, his mouth wide and sincere. He was trim. The dark brown buisness suit was hand-tailored and hung well. He sat easily and crossed his legs, revealing black hose that went above the shins. His shoes were highly polished.

"That's a fascinating door, the one to your outer office," Talbot said.

"Do we talk about my door?" Demeter asked.

"Not if you don't want to. That isn't why I came here."

"I don't want to. So let's discuss your particular problem."

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"Your advertisement. I was intrigued."

Demeter smiled reassuringly. "Four copywriters worked very diligently at the proper phraseology."

"It brings in business."

"The right kind of business."

"You slanted it toward smart money. Very reserved. Conservative portfolios, few glamours, steady climbers. Wise old owls."

Demeter steepled his fingers and nodded, an understanding uncle. "Directly to the core, Mr. Talbot: wise old owls."

"I need some information. Some special, certain information. How confidential is your service, Mr. Demeter?"

The friendly uncle, the wise old owl, the reassuring businessman understood all the edited spaces behind the question. He nodded several times. Then he smiled and said, "That *is* a clever door I have, isn't it? You're absolutely right, Mr. Talbot."

"A certain understated eloquence."

"Hopefully, it answers more questions for our clients than it poses."

Talbot sat back in the chair for the first time since he had entered Demeter's office. "I think I can accept that."

"Fine. Then why don't we get to specifics. Mr. Talbot, you're having some difficulty dying. Am I stating the situation succinctly?"

"Gently, Mr. Demeter."

"Always."

"Yes. You're on the target."

"But you have some problems, some rather unusual problems."

"Inner ring."

Demeter stood up and walked around the room, touching an astrolabe on a bookshelf, a cut glass decanter on a sideboard, a sheaf of *London Times'* held together by a wooden pole. "We are only information specialists, Mr. Talbot. We can put you on to what you need, but the effectation is your problem."

"If I have the *modus operandi,* I'll have no trouble taking care of getting it done."

"You've put a little aside." A little."

"Conservative portfolio? A few glamours, mostly steady climbers?"

"Bullseye, Mr. Demeter."

Demeter came back and sat down again. "All right, then. If you'll take the time to very carefully write out *precisely* what you want — I know generally, from your letter, but I want this *precise,* for the contract — I think I can undertake to supply the data necessary to solving your problem."

"At what cost?"

"Let's decide what it is you want, first, shall we?"

Talbot nodded. Demeter reached over and pressed a call button on the smoking stand beside the wingback. The door opened. "Susan, would you show Mr. Talbot to the sanctum and provide him with writing materials." She

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smiled and stood aside, waiting for Talbot to follow her. "And bring Mr. Talbot something to drink if he'd like it ... some coffee? A soft drink, perhaps?" Talbot did not respond to the offer.

"I might need some time to get the praseology down just right. I might have to work as diligently as your copywriters. It might take me a while. I'll go home and bring it in tomorrow."

Demeter looked troubled. "That might be inconvenient. That's why we provide a quiet place where you can think."

"You'd prefer I do it now."

"Inner ring, Mr. Talbot."

"You might be a toilet if I came back tomorrow."

"Bullseye."

"Let's go, Susan. Bring me a glass of orange juice if you have it." He preceded her out the door.

He followed her down the corridor at the far side of the reception room. He had not seen it before. She stopped at a door and opened it for him. There was an escritoire and a comfortable chair inside the small room. He could hear Muzak. "I'll bring you your orange juice," she said.

He went in and sat down. After a long time he wrote seven words on a sheet of paper.

Two months later, long after the series of visitations from silent messengers who brought rough drafts of the contract to be examined, who came again to take them away revised, who came again with counter-proposals, who came again to take away further revised versions, who came again — finally — with Demeter-signed finals, and who waited while he examined and initialed and signed the finals — two months later, the map came via the last, mute messenger. He arranged for the final installment of the payment to Information Associates that same day: he had ceased wondering where fifteen boxcars of maize — grown specifically as the Zuni nation had grown it — was of value.

Two days later, a small item on an inside page of the New York *Times* noted that fifteen boxcars of farm produce had somehow vanished off a railroad spur near Albuquerque. An official investigation had been initiated.

The map was very specific, very detailed; it looked accurate.

He spent several days with Grey's *Anatomy* and, when he was satisfied that Demeter and his organization had been worth the staggering fee, he made a phone call. The long distance operator turned him over to Inboard and he waited for the static-laden connection to be made. He insisted the Budapest operator on the other end let it ring twenty times, twice the number he was permitted per caller. On the twenty-first ring it was picked up. Miraculously, the background noise-level dropped and he heard Victor's voice as though it was across the room.

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"Yes! Hello!" Impatient, surly as always.

Victor ... Larry Talbot."

"Where are you calling from?"

"That States. How are you?"

"Busy. What do you want?"

"I have a project. I want to hire you and your lab."

"Forget it. I'm coming down to final moments on a project and I can't be bothered now."

The imminence of hangup was in his voice. Talbot cut in quickly. "How long do you anticipate?"

"Till what?"

"Till you're clear."

"Another six months inside, eight to ten if it gets muddy. I said: forget it, Larry. I'm *not* available."

"At least let's talk."

"No."

"Am I wrong, Victor, or do you owe me a little?"

"After all this time you're calling in debts?"

"They only ripen with age."

There was a long silence in which Talbot heard dead space being pirated off their line. At one point he thought the other man had racked the receiver. Then, finally, "Okay, Larry. We'll *talk.* But you'll have to come to me; I'm too involved to be hopping any jets."

"That's fine. I have free time." A slow beat, then he added, "Nothing but free time."

"*After* the full moon, Larry." It was said with great specificity.

"Of course. I'll meet you at the last place we met, at the same time, on the thirtieth of this month. Do you remember?"

"I remember. That'll be fine."

"Thank you, Victor. I appreciate this."

There was no response.

Talbot's voice softened: "How is your father?"

"Goodbye, Larry," he answered, and hung up.

They met on the thirtieth of that month, at moonless midnight, on the corpse barge that piled between Buda and Pesht. It was the correct sort of night: chill fog moved in a pulsing curtain up the Danube from Belgrade.

They shook hands in the lee of a stack of cheap wooden coffins and, after hesitating awkwardly for a moment, they embraced like brothers. Talbot's smile was tight and barely discernible by the withered illumination of the lantern and the barge's running lights as he said, "All right, get it said so I don't have to wait for the other shoe to drop."

Victor grinned and murmured ominously.

"Even a man who is pure in heart

"And says his prayers by night,

"May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms

"And the Autumn moon shines bright."

Talbot made a face. "And other songs from the same album."

"Still saying your prayers at night?"

"I stopped that when I realized the damned thing didn't scan."

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"Hey. We aren't here getting pneumonia just to discuss forced rhyme."

The lines of weariness in Talbot's face settled into a joyless pattern. "Victor, I need your help."

"I'll listen, Larry. Further than that it's doubtful."

Talbot weighed the warning and said, "Three months ago I answered an advertisement in *Forbes*, the business magazine. Information Associates. It was a cleverly-phrased, very reserved, small box, inconspicuously placed. Except to those who knew how to read it. I won't waste your time on details but the sequence went like this: I answered the ad, hinting at my problem as circuitously as possible without being completely impenetrable. Vague words about important money. I had hopes. Well, I hit with this one. They sent back a letter calling a meet. Perhaps another false trail, was what I thought ... God knows there've been enough of those."

Victor lit a Sobranie Black & Gold and let the pungent scent of the smoke drift away on the fog. "But you went."

"I went. Peculiar outfit, sophisticated security system; I had a strong feeling they came from, well, I'm not sure where ... or when."

Victor's glance was abruptly kilowatts heavier with interest. "*When*, you say? Temporal travelers?"

"I don't know."

"I've been waiting for something like that, you know. It's inevitable. And they'd certainly make themselves known eventually."

He lapsed into silence, thinking. Talbot brought him back sharply. "I don't know, Victor. I really don't. But that's not my concern at the moment."

"Oh. Right. Sorry, Larry. Go on. You met with them ..."

"Man named Demeter. I thought there might be some clue there. The name. I didn't think of it at the time. The name Demeter, there was a florist in Cleveland, many years ago. But later, when I looked it up, Demeter, the Earth goddess, Greek mythology ... no connection. At least, I don't think so.

"We talked. He understood my problem and said he'd undertake the commission. But he wanted it. specific, what I required of him, wanted it specific for the contract — God knows how he would have enforced the contract, but I'm sure he could have — he had a *window*, Victor, it looked out on —"

Victor spun the cigarette off his thumb and middle finger, snapping it straight down into the blood-black Danube. "Larry, you're maundering."

Talbot's words caught in his throat. It was true. "I'm counting on you, Victor. I'm afraid it's putting my usual aplomb out of phase."

"All right, take it easy. Let me

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hear the rest of this and we'll see. Relax."

Talbot nodded and felt grateful. "I wrote out the nature of the commission. It was only seven words." He reached into his topcoat pocket and brought out a folded slip of paper. Victor unfolded the paper and read:

GEOGRAPHICAL
COORDINATES FOR
LOCATION OF MY SOUL

Victor looked at the line of type long after he had absorbed its message. When he handed it back to Talbot, he wore a new, fresher expression. "You'll never give up, will you, Larry?"

"Did your father?"

"No." Great sadness flickered across the face of the man Talbot called Victor. "And," he added, tightly, after a beat, "he's been lying in a catatonia sling for sixteen years *because* he wouldn't give up." He lapsed into silence. Finally, softly, "It never hurts to know when to give up, Larry. Never hurts. Sometimes you've just got to leave it alone."

Talbot snorted softly with bemusement. "Easy enough for you to say, old chum. You're going to die."

"That wasn't fair, Larry."

"Then help me, dammit! I've gone further toward getting myself out of all this than I ever have. Now I need *you.* You've got the expertise."

"Have you sounded out 3M or Rand or even General Dynamics? They've got good people there."

"Damn you."

"Okay. Sorry. Let me think a minute."

The corpse barge cut through the invisible water, silent, fog-shrouded, without Charon, without Styx, merely a public service, a garbage scow of unfinished sentences, uncompleted errands, unrealized dreams. With the exception of these two, talking, the barge's supercargo had left decisions and desertions behind.

Then, Victor said, softly, talking as much to himself as to Talbot, "We could do it with microtelemetry. Either through direct microminiaturizing techniques or by shrinking a servomechanism package containing sensing, remote control, and guidance / manipulative / propulsion hardware. Use a saline solution to inject it into the bloodstream. Knock you out with 'Russian sleep' and/or tap into the sensory nerves so you'd perceive or control the device as if you were there...conscious transfer of point of view."

Talbot looked at him expectantly.

"No. Forget it," said Victor. "It won't do."

He continued to think. Talbot reached into the other's jacket pocket and brought out the Sobranies. He lit one and stood silently, waiting. It was always thus

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with Victor. He had to worm his way through the analytical labyrinth.

"Maybe the biotechnic equivalent: a tailored microorganism or slug...injected...telepathic link established. No. Too many flaws: possible ego/control conflict. Impaired perceptions. Maybe it could be a hive creature injected for multiple p.o.v." A pause, then, "No. No good."

Talbot drew on the cigarette, letting the mysterious Eastern smoke curl through his lungs. "How about ... say, just for the sake of discussion," Victor said, "say the egolid exists to some extent in each sperm. It's been ventured. Raise the consciousness in one cell and send it on a mission to ... forget it, that's metaphysical bullshit. Oh, damn damn damn ... this will take time and thought, Larry. Go away, let me think on it. I'll get back to you."

Talbot butted the Sobranie on the railing, and exhaled the final stream of smoke. "Okay, Victor. I take it you're interested sufficiently to work at it."

"I'm a scientist, Larry. That means I'm hooked. I'd have to be an idiot not to be ... this speaks directly to what ... to what my father ..."

"I understand. I'll let you alone. I'll wait."

They rode across in silence, the one thinking of solutions, the other considering problems. When they parted, it was with an embrace.

Talbot flew back the next morning, and waited through the nights of the full moon, knowing better than to pray. It only muddied the waters. And angered the gods.

When the phone rang, and Talbot lifted the receiver, he knew what it would be. He had known *every* time the phone had rung, for over two months. "Mr. Talbot? Western Union. We have a cablegram for you, from Moldava, Czechoslovakia."

"Please read it."

"It's very short, sir. It says, 'Come immediately. The trial has been marked.' It's signed, 'Victor.'"

He departed less than an hour later. The Learjet had been on the ready line since he had returned from Budapest, fuel tanks regularly topped-off and flight-plan logged. His suitcase had been packed for seventy-two days, waiting beside the door, visas and passport current, and handily stored in an inner pocket. When he departed, the apartment continued to tremble for some time with the echoes of his leaving.

The flight seemed endless, interminable; he *knew* it was taking longer than necessary.

Customs, even with high government clearances (all masterpieces of forgery) and bribes, seemed to be drawn out sadistically by the mustached trio of petty officials; secure, and reveling in their momentary power.

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The overland facilities could not merely be called slow. They were reminiscent of the Molasses Man who cannot run till he's warmed-up and who, when he's warmed-up, grows too soft to run.

Expectedly, like the most suspenseful chapter of a cheap gothic novel, a fierce electrical storm suddenly erupted out of the mountains when the ancient touring car was within a few miles of Talbot's destination. It rose up through the steep mountain pass, hurtling out of the sky, black as a grave, and swept across the road obscuring everything.

The driver, a taciturn man whose accent had marked him as a Serbian, held the big saloon to the center of the road with the tenacity of a rodeo rider, hands at ten till and ten after midnight on the wheel.

"Mister Talbot."

"Yes?"

"It grow worse. Will I turn back?"

"How much farther?"

"Perhaps seven kilometer."

Headlights caught the moment of uprootment as a small tree by the roadside toppled toward them. The driver spun the wheel and accelerated. They rushed past as naked branches scraped across the boot of the touring car with the sound of fingernails on a blackboard. Talbot found he had been holding his breath. Death was beyond him, yet the menace of the moment denied that knowledge.

"I have to get there."

"Then I go on. Be at ease."

Talbot settled back. He could see the Serb smiling in the rear-view mirror. Secure, he stared out the window. Branches of lightning shattered the darkness, causing the surrounding landscape to assume ominous, unsettling shapes.

Finally, he arrived.

The laboratory, an incongruous modernistic cube — bone white against the — again — ominous basalt of the looming prominences — sat high above the rutted road. They had been climbing steadily for hours and now, like carnivores waiting for the most opportune moment, the Carpathians loomed all around them.

The driver negotiated the final mile and a half up the access road to the laboratory with difficulty: tides of dark, topsoil-and-twig-laden water rushed past them.

Victor was waiting for him. Without extended greetings he had an associate take the suitcase, and he hurried Talbot to the sub-ground floor theater where a half dozen technicians moved quickly at their tasks, plying between enormous banks of controls and a huge glass plate hanging suspended from guy-wires beneath the track-laden ceiling.

The mood was one of highly-charged expectancy; Talbot could feel it in the sharp, short glances the technicians threw him, in the way Victor steered him by the arm,

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in the uncanny racehorse readiness of the peculiar-looking machines around which the men and women swarmed. And he sensed in Victor's manner that something new and wonderful was about to be born in this laboratory. That perhaps ... at last ... after so terribly, lightlessly long ... peace waited for him in this white-tiled room. Victor was fairly bursting to talk.

"Final adjustments," he said, indicating two female technicians working at a pair of similar machines mounted opposite each other on the walls facing the glass plate. To Talbot, they looked like laser projectors of a highly complex design. The women were tracking them slowly left and right on their gimbals, accompanied by soft electrical humming. Victor let Talbot study them for a long moment, then said, "Not lasers. *Grasers*. Gamma Ray Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. Pay attention to them, they're at least half the heart of the answer to your problem."

The technicians took sightings across the room, through the glass, and nodded at one another. Then the older of the two, a woman in her fifties, called to victor.

"On line, Doctor."

Victor waved acknowledgment, and turned back to Talbot. "We'd have been ready sooner, but this damned storm. It's been going on for a week. It wouldn't have hampered us but we had a freak lightning strike on our main transformer. The power supply was on emergency for several days and it's taken a while to get everything up to peak strength again."

A door opened in the wall of the gallery to Talbot's right. It opened slowly, as though it was heavy and the strength needed to force it was lacking. The yellow baked enamel plate on the door said, in heavy black letters, in French, PERSONNEL MONITORING DEVICES ARE REQUIRED BEYOND THIS ENTRANCE. The door swung fully open, at last, and Talbot saw the warning plate on the other side: CAUTION RADIATION AREA. There was a three-armed, triangular-shaped design beneath the words. He thought of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. For no rational reason.

Then he saw the sign beneath, and had his rational reason: OPENING THIS DOOR FOR MORE THAN 30 SECONDS WILL REQUIRE A SEARCH AND SECURE.

Talbot's attention was divided between the doorway and what Victor had said. "You seem worried about the storm."

"Not worried," Victor said, "just cautious. There's no conceivable way it could interfere with the experiment, unless we had another direct hit, which I doubt —we've taken special precautions— but I wouldn't want to risk the power going out in the middle of the shot."

"The shot?"

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"I'll explain all that. In fact, I *have* to explain it, so your mite will have the knowledge." Victor smiled at Talbot's confusion. "Don't worry about it." And old woman in a lab smock had come through the door and now stood just behind and to the right of Talbot, waiting, clearly, for their conversation to end so she could speak to Victor.

Victor turned his eyes to her. "Yes, Nadja?"

Talbot looked at her. An acid rain began falling in his stomach.

"Yesterday considerable effort was directed toward finding the cause of a high field horizontal instability," she said, speaking softly, tonelessly, a page of some specific status report. "The attendant beam blowup prevented efficient extraction." Eighty, if a day. Gray eyes sunk deep in folds of crinkled flesh the color of liver paste. "During the afternoon the accelerator was shut down to effect several repairs." Withered, weary, bent, too many bones for the sack. "The super pinger at C48 was replaced with a section of vacuum chamber; it had a vacuum leak." Talbot was in extreme pain. Memories came at him in ravening hordes, a dark wave of ant bodies gnawing at everything soft and folded and vulnerable in his brain. "Two hours of beam time were lost during the owl shift because a solenoid failed on a new vacuum valve in the transfer hall."

"Mother ...?" Talbot said, whispering hoarsely.

The old woman started violently, her head coming around and her eyes of settled ashes widening. "Victor," she said, terror in the word.

Talbot barely moved, but Victor took him by the arm and held him. "Thank you, Nadja; go down to target station B and log the secondary beams. Go right now."

She moved past them, hobbling, and quickly vanished through another door in the far wall, held open for her by one of the younger women.

Talbot watched her go, tears in his eyes.

"Oh my God, Victor. It was..."

"No, Larry, it wasn't."

"It was. So help me God it *was*! But *how*, Victor, tell me *how*?"

Victor turned him and lifted his chin with his free hand. "Look at me, Larry. *Damn it,* I said *look at me:* it wasn't. You're wrong."

The last time Lawrence Talbot had cried had been the morning he had awakened from sleep, lying under hydrangea shrubs in the botanical garden next to the Minneapolis Museum of Art, lying beside something bloody and still. Under his fingernails had been caked flesh and dirt and blood. That had been the time he learned about manacles and releasing oneself from them when in one state of consciousness, but not in another. Now he felt like crying. Again. With cause.

"Wait here a moment," Victor said. "Larry? Will you wait right

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here for me? I'll be back in a moment."

He nodded, averting his face, and Victor went away. While he stood there, waves of painful memory thundering through him, a door slid open into the wall at the far side of the chamber, and another white-smocked technician stuck his head into the room. Through the opening, Talbot could see massive machinery in an enormous chamber beyond. Titanium electrodes. Stainless steel cones. He thought he recognized it: a Cockroft-Walton pre-accelerator.

Victor came back with a glass of milky liquid. He handed it to Talbot.

"Victor—" the male technician called from the far doorway.

"Drink it," Victor said to Talbot, then turned to the technician.

"Ready to run."

Victor waved to him. "Give me about ten minutes, Karl, then take it up to the first phase shift and signal us." The technician nodded understanding and vanished through the doorway; the door slid out of the wall and closed, hiding the imposing chamberfull of equipment. "And that was part of the other half of the mystical, magical solution to your problem," the physicist said, smiling now like a proud father.

"What was that I drank?"

"Something to stabilize you. I can't have you hallucinating."

"I wasn't hallucinating. What was her name?"

"Nadja. You're wrong; you've never seen her before in your life. Have I ever lied to you? How far back do we know each other? I need your trust if this is going to go all the way."

"I'll be all right." The milky liquid had already begun to work. Talbot's face lost its flush, his hands ceased trembling.

Victor was very stern suddenly, a scientist without the time for sidetracks; there was information to be imparted. "Good; for a moment I thought I'd spent a great deal of time preparing ... well," and he smiled again, quickly, "let me put it this way: I thought for a moment no one was coming to my party."

Talbot gave a strained, tiny chuckle, and followed Victor to a bank of television monitors set into rolling frame-stacks in a corner. "Okay. Let's get you briefed." He turned on sets, one after another, till all twelve were glowing, each one holding a scene of dull-finished and massive installations.

Monitor #1 showed an endlessly long underground tunnel painted eggshell white. Talbot had spent much of his two month wait reading; he recognized the tunnel as a view down the "straightaway" of the main ring. Gigantic bending magnets in their shockproof concrete cradles glowed faintly in the dim light of the tunnel.

Monitor #2 showed the linac tunnel.

Monitor #3 showed the rectifier

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stack of the Cockroft-Walton preaccelerator.

Monitor #4 was a view of the booster. Monitor #5 showed the interior of the transfer hall. Monitors #6 through #9 revealed three experimental target areas and, smaller in scope and size, an internal target area supporting the meson, neutrino and proton areas.

The remaining three monitors showed research areas in the underground lab complex, the final one of which was the main hall itself, where Talbot stood looking into twelve monitors, in the twelfth screen of which could be seen Talbot standing looking into twelve ...

Victor turned off the sets.

All Talbot could think of was the old woman called Nadja. It *couldn't* be. "Larry! What did you see?"

"From what I could see," Talbot said, "that looked to be a particle accelerator. And it looked as big as CERN's proton synchrotron in Geneva."

Victor was impressed. "You've been doing some reading."

"It behooved me."

"Well, well. Let's see if I can impress *you*. CERN's accelerator reaches energies up to 33 BeV; the ring underneath this room reaches energies of 15 GeV."

"Giga meaning trillion."

"You *have* been reading up, haven't you! Fifteen *trillion* electron volts. There's simply no keeping secrets from you, is there, Larry?"

"Only one."

Victor waited expectantly.

"Can you do it?"

"Yes. Meteorology says the eye is almost passing over us. We'll have better than an hour, more than enough time for the dangerous parts of the experiment."

"But you *can* do it."

"Yes, Larry. I don't like having to say it twice." There was no hesitancy in his voice, none of the "yes but" equivocations he'd always heard before. Victor had found the trail.

"I'm sorry, Victor. Anxiety. But if we're ready, why do I have to go through an indoctrination?"

Victor grinned wryly and began reciting, "As your Wizard, I am about to embark on a hazardous and technically unexplainable journey to the upper stratosphere. To confer, converse, and otherwise hobnob with my fellow wizards."

Talbot threw up his hands. "No more."

"Okay, then. Pay attention. If I didn't have to, I wouldn't; believe me, nothing is more boring than listening to the sound of my own lectures. But your mite has to have all the data *you* have. So listen. Now comes the boring — but incredibly informative — explanation."

Western Europe's CERN — *Conseil Europeen pour la Recherche Nucleaire* — had settled on Geneva as the site for their Big Machine. Holland lost out on the rich plum

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because it was common knowledge the food was lousy in the Lowlands. A small matter, but a significant one.

The Eastern Bloc's CEERN — *Conseil de l'Europe de l'Est pour la Recherche Nucleaire* — had been forced into selecting this isolated location high in the White Carpathians (over such likelier and more hospitable sites as Cluj in Rumania, Budapest in Hungary and Gdansk in Poland) because Talbot's friend Victor had selected this site. CERN had had Dahl and Widerоe and Goward and Adams and Reich; CEERN had Victor. It balanced. He could call the tune.

So the laboratory had been painstakingly built to his specifications, and the particle accelerator drawfed the CERN Machine. It dwarfed the four-mile ring at the National Accelerator Lab in Batavia, Illinois. It was, in fact, the world's largest, most advanced "synchrophasotron."

Only seventy per cent of the experiments conducted in the underground laboratory were devoted to projects sponsored by CEERN. One hundred per cent of the staff of Victor's complex were personally committed to him, not to CEERN, not to the Eastern Bloc, not to philosophies or dogmas ... to the man. So thirty per cent of the experiments run on the sixteen-mile-diameter accelerator ring were Victor's own. If CEERN knew — and it would have been difficult for them to find out — it said nothing. Seventy per cent of the fruits of genius was better than no per cent.

Had Talbot known earlier that Victor's research was thrust in the direction of actualizing advanced theoretical breakthroughs in the nature of the structure of fundamental particles, he would never have wasted his time with the pseudos and deadenders who had spent years on his problem, who had promised everything and delivered nothing but dust. But then, until Information Associates had marked the trail — a trail he had previously followed in every direction but the unexpected one that merged shadow with substance, reality with fantasy — until then, he had had no need for Victor's exotic talents.

While CEERN basked in the warmth of secure knowledge that their resident genius was keeping them in front in the Super Accelerator Sweepstakes, Victor was briefing his oldest friend on the manner in which he would gift him with the peace of death; the manner in which Lawrence Talbot would find his soul; the manner in which he would precisely and exactly go inside his own body.

"The answer to your problem is in two parts. First, we have to create a perfect simulacrum of you, a hundred thousand or a million times smaller than you, the original. Then, second, we have to *actualize* it, turn an image into something corporeal, material, something that exists. A miniature

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you with all the reality you possess, all the memories, all the knowledge."

Talbot felt very mellow. The milky liquid had smoothed out the churning waters of his memory. He smiled. "I'm glad it wasn't a difficult problem."

Victor looked rueful. "Next week I invent the steam engine. Get serious, Larry."

"It's that Lethe cocktail you fed me."

Victor's mouth tightened and Talbot knew he had to get hold of himself. "Go on, I'm sorry."

Victor hesitated a moment, securing his position of seriousness with a touch of free-floating guilt, then went on, "The first part of the problem is solved by using the Grasers we've developed. We'll shoot a hologram of you, using a wave generated not from the electrons of the atom, but from the nucleus ... a wave a million times shorter, greater in resolution than that from a Laser." He walked toward the large glass plate hanging in the middle of the lab, Grasers trained on its center. "Come here."

Talbot followed him.

"Is this the holographic plate," he said, "it's just a sheet of photographic glass, isn't it?"

"Not this," Victor said, touching the ten-foot square plate, *"This!"* He put his finger on a spot in the center of the glass and Talbot leaned in to look. He saw nothing at first, then detected a and when he put his face as close as possible to the imperfection he perceived a light *moire* pattern, like the surface of a fine silk scarf. He looked back at Victor.

"Microholographic plate," Victor said. "Smaller than an integrated chip. That's where we capture your spirit, white-eyes, a million times reduced. About the size of a single cell, maybe a red corpuscle."

Talbot giggled.

"Come on," Victor said wearily. "You've had too much to drink, and it's my fault. Let's get this show on the road. You'll be straight by the time we're ready ... I just hope to God your mite isn't cockeyed."

They stood him, naked, in front of the ground photographic plate. The older of the female technicians aimed the Graser at him, there was a soft sound Talbot took to be some mechanism locking into position, and then Victor said, "All right, Larry, that's it."

He stared at them, expecting more.

"That's it?"

The technicians seemed very pleased, and amused at his reaction. "All done," said Victor. It had been that quick. He hadn't even seen the Graser wave hit and lock in his image. "That's *it?*" he said again. Victor began to laugh. It spread through the lab. The technicians were clinging to their equipment; tears rolled down

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Victor's cheeks; everyone gasped for breath; and Talbot stood in front of the minute imperfection in the glass and felt like a retard.

"That's it?" he said again, helplessly.

After a long time, they dried their eyes and Victor moved him away from the huge plate of glass. "All done, Larry, and ready to go. Are you cold?"

Talbot's naked flesh was evenly polka dotted with goosebumps. One of the technicians brought him a smock to wear. He stood and watched. Clearly, he was no longer the center of attention.

Now the alternate Graser and the holographic plate ripple in the glass were the focuses of attention. Now the mood of released tension was past and the lines of serious attention were back in the faces of the lab staff. Now Victor was wearing an intercom headset, and Talbot heard him say, "All right, Karl. Bring it up to full power."

Almost instantly the lab was filled with the sound of generators phasing up. It became painful and Talbot felt his teeth begin to ache. It went up and up, a whine that climbed till it was beyond his hearing.

Victor made a hand signal to the younger female technician at the Graser behind the glass plate. She bent to the projector's sighting mechanism once, quickly, then cut it in. Talbot saw no light beam, but there was the same locking sound he had heard earlier, and then a soft humming, and a life-size hologram of himself, standing naked as he had been a few moments before, trembled in the air where he had stood. He looked at Victor questioningly. Victor nodded, and Talbot walked to the phantasm, passed his hand through it, stood close and looked into the clear brown eyes, noted the wide pore patterns in the nose, studied himself more closely than he had ever been able to do in a mirror. He felt: as if someone had walked over his grave.

Victor was talking to three male technicians, and a moment later they came to examine the hologram. They moved in with light meters and sensitive instruments that apparently were capable of gauging the sophistication and clarity of the ghost image. Talbot watched, fascinated and terrified. It seemed he was about to embark on the great journey of his life; a journey with a much-desired destination: surcease.

One of the technicians signaled Victor.

"It's pure," he said to Talbot. Then, to the younger female technician on the second Graser projector, "All right, Jana, move it out of there." She started up an engine and the entire projector apparatus turned on heavy rubber wheels and rolled out of the way. The image of Talbot, naked and vulnerable, a little sad to Talbot as he watched it fade and vanish like morning mist, had disappeared

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when the technician turned off the projector.

"All right, Karl," Victor was saying, "we're moving the pedestal in now. Narrow the aperture, and wait for my signal." Then, to Talbot, "Here comes your mite, old friend."

Talbot felt a sense of resurrection.

The older female technician rolled a four foot high stainless steel pedestal to the center of the lab, positioned it so the tiny, highly-polished spindle atop the pedestal touched the very bottom of the faint ripple in the glass. It looked like, and was, an actualizing stage for the real test. The full-sized hologram had been a gross test to insure the image's perfection. Now came the creation of a living entity, a Lawrence Talbot, naked and the size of a single cell, possessing a consciousness and intelligence and memories and desires identical to Talbot's own.

"Ready, Karl?" Victor was saying.

Talbot heard no reply, but Victor nodded his head as if listening. Then he said, "All right, extract the beam!"

It happened so fast, Talbot missed most of it.

The micropion beam was composed of particles a million times smaller than the proton, smaller than the quark, smaller than the muon or the pion. Victor had termed them micropions. The slit opened in the wall, the beam was diverted, passed through the holographic ripple and was cut off as the slit closed again.

It had all taken a billionth of a second.

"Done," Victor said.

"I don't see anything," Talbot said, and realized how silly he must sound to these people. Of *course* he didn't see anything. There was nothing to see ... with the naked eye. "Is he ... is it there?"

"You're there," Victor said. He waved to one of the male technicians standing at a wall hutch of instruments in protective bays, and the man hurried over with the slim, reflective barrel of a microscope. He clipped it onto the tiny needle-pointed stand atop the pedestal in a fashion Talbot could not quite follow. Then he stepped away, and Victor said, "Part two of your problem solved, Larry. Go look and see yourself."

Lawrence Talbot went to the microscope, adjusted the knob till he could see the reflective surface of the spindle, and saw himself in infinitely reduced perfection.

staring up at himself. He recognized himself, though all he could see was a cyclopean brown eye staring down from the smooth glass satellite that dominated his sky.

He waved. The eye blinked.

Now it begins, he thought.

Lawrence Talbot stood at the lip of the huge crater that formed

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Lawrence Talbot's navel. He looked down into the bottomless pit with its atrophied remnants of umbilicus forming loops and protuberances, smooth and undulant and vanishing into utter darkness. He stood poised to descend and smelled the smells of his own body. First, sweat. Then the smells that wafted up from within. The smell of penicillin like biting down on tin foil with a bad tooth. The smell of aspirin, chalky and tickling the hairs of his nose like cleaning blackboard erasers by banging them together. The smells of rotted food, digested and turning to waste. All the odors rising up out of himself like a wild symphony of dark colors.

He sat down on the rounded rim of the navel and let himself slip forward.

He slid down, rode over an outcropping, dropped a few feet and slid again, tobogganing into darkness. He fell for only a short time, then brought up against the soft and yielding, faintly springy tissue plane where the umbilicus had been ligated. The darkness at the bottom of the hole suddenly shattered as blinding light filled the navel. Shielding his eyes, Talbot looked up the shaft toward the sky. A sun glowed there, brighter than a thousand novae. Victor had moved a surgical lamp over the hole to assist him. For as long as he could.

Talbot saw the umbra of something large moving behind the light; he strained to discern what it was: it seemed important to know what it was. And for an instant, before his eyes closed against the glare, he thought he knew what it had been. Someone watching him, staring down past the surgical lamp that hung above the naked, anesthetized body of Lawrence Talbot, asleep on an operating table.

It had been the old woman, Nadja.

He stood unmoving for a long time, thinking of her.

Then he went to his knees and felt the tissue plane that formed the floor of the navel shaft.

He thought he could see something moving beneath the surface, like water flowing under a film of ice. He went down onto his stomach and cupped his hands around his eyes, putting his face against the dead flesh. It was like looking through a pane of isinglass. A trembling membrane through which he could see the collapsed lumen of the atretic umbilical vein. There was no opening. He pressed his palms against the rubbery surface and it gave, but only slightly. Before he could find the treasure, he had to follow the route of Demeter's map — now firmly and forever consigned to memory — and before he could set foot upon that route, he had to gain access to his own body.

But he had nothing with which to force that entrance.

Excluded, standing at the portal to his own body, Lawrence

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Talbot felt anger rising within him. His life had been anguish and guilt and horror, had been the wasted result of events over which he had had no control. Pentagrams and full moons and blood and never putting on even an ounce of fat because of a diet high in protein, blood steroids healthier than any normal adult male's, triglycerol and cholesterol levels balanced and humming. And death forever a stranger. Anger flooded through him. He heard an inarticulate little moan of pain, and fell forward, began tearing at the atrophied cord with teeth that had been used for similar activity many times before. Through a blood haze he knew he was savaging his own body, and it seemed exactly the appropriate act of self-flagellation.

An outsider; he had been an outsider all his adult life, and fury would permit him to be shut out no longer. With demonic purpose he ripped away at the clumps of flesh until the membrane gave, at last, and a gap was torn through opening him to himself...

And he was blinded by the explosion of light, by the rush of wind, by the passage of something that had been just beneath the surface writhing to be set free, and in the instant before he plummeted into unconsciousness, he knew Castaneda's Don Juan had told the truth: a thick bundle of white cobwebby filaments, tinged with gold, fibers of light, shot free from the collapsed vein, rose up through the shaft and trembled toward the antiseptic sky.

A metaphysical, otherwise invisible beanstalk that trailed away above him, rising up and up and up as his eyes closed and he sank away into oblivion.

He was on his stomach, crawling through the collapsed lumen, the center, of the path the veins had taken back from the amniotic sac to the fetus. Propelling himself forward the way an infantry scout would through dangerous terrain, using elbows and knees, frog-crawling, he opened the flattened tunnel with his head just enough to get through. It was quite light, the interior of the world called Lawrence Talbot suffused with a golden luminescence.

The map had routed him out of this pressed tunnel through the inferior vena cava to the right atrium and thence through the right ventricle, the pulmonary arteries, through the valves, to the lungs, the pulmonary veins, crossover to the left side of the heart (left atrium, left ventricle), the aorta — bypassing the three coronary arteries above the aortic valves — and down over the arch of the aorta — bypassing the carotid and other arteries — to the celiac trunk where the arteries split in a confusing array: the gastro-duodenal to the stomach, the hepatic to the liver, the splenic to the spleen. And there, dorsal to the body of the

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diaphragm, he would drop down past the greater pancreatic duct to the pancreas itself. And there, among the islets of Langerhans, he would find, at the coordinates Information Associates had given him, he would find that which had been stolen from him one full-mooned night of horror so very long ago. And having found it, having assured himself of eternal sleep, not merely physical death from a silver bullet, he would stop his heart — how, he did not know, but he would — and it would all be ended for Lawrence Talbot, who had become what he had beheld. There, in the tail of the pancreas, supplied with blood by the splenic artery, lay the greatest treasure of all. More than doubloons, more than spices and silks, more than oil lamps used as djinn prisons by Solomon, lay final and sweet eternal peace, a release from monsterdom.

He pushed the final few feet of dead vein apart, and his head emerged into open space. He was hanging upside-down in a cave of deep orange rock.

Talbot wriggled his arms loose, braced them against what was clearly the ceiling of the cave, and wrenched his body out of the tunnel. He fell heavily, trying to twist at the last moment to catch the impact on his shoulders, and received a nasty blow on the side of the neck for his trouble.

He lay there for a moment, clearing his head. Then he stood and walked forward. The cave opened onto a ledge, and he walked out and stared at the landscape before him. The skeleton of something only faintly human lay tortuously crumpled against the wall of the cliff. He was afraid to look at it very closely.

He stared off across the world of dead orange rock, folded and rippled like a topographical view across the frontal lobe of a brain removed from its cranial casing.

The sky was a light yellow, bright and pleasant.

The grand canyon of his body was a seemingly horizonless tumble of atrophied rock, dead for millennia. He sought out and found a descent from the ledge, and began the trek.

There was water, and it kept him alive. Apparently, it rained more frequently here in this parched and stunned wasteland than appearance indicated. There was no keeping track of days or months, for there was no night and no day — always the same even, wonderful golden luminescence — but Talbot felt his passage down the central spine of orange mountains had taken him almost six months. And in that time it had rained forty-eight times, or roughly twice a week. Baptismal founts of water were filled at every downpour, and he found if he kept the soles of his naked feet moist, he could walk without flagging energy. If he ate, he did not remember how

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often, nor what form the food had taken.

He saw no other signs of life.

Save an occasional skeleton lying against a shadowed wall of orange rock. Often, they had no skulls.

He found a pass through the mountains, finally, and crossed. He went up through foothills into lower, gentle slopes, and then up again, into cruel and narrow passages that wound higher and high toward the heat of the sky. When he reached the summit, he found the path down the opposite side was straight and wide and easy. He descended quickly; only a matter of days, it seemed.

Descending into the valley, he heard the song of a bird. He followed the sound. It led him to a crater of igneous rock, quite large, set low among the grassy swells of the valley. He came upon it without warning, and trudged up its short incline, to stand at the volcanic lip looking down.

The crater had become a lake. The smell rose up to assault him. Vile, and somehow terribly sad. The song of the bird continued; he could see no bird anywhere in the golden sky. The smell of the lake made him ill.

Then as he sat on the edge of the crater, staring down, he realized the lake was filled with dead things, floating bellyup; purple and blue as a strangled baby, rotting white, turning slowly in the faintly rippled gray water; without features or limbs. He went down to the lowest outthrust of volcanic rock and stared at the dead things.

Something swam toward him. He moved back. It came on faster, and as it neared the wall of the crater, it surfaced, singing its bluejay song, swerved to rip a chunk of rotting flesh fromt he corpse of a floating dead thing, and paused only a moment as if to remind him that this was not his, Talbot's, domain, but his own.

Like Talbot, the fish would not die.

Talbot sat at the lip of the crater for a long time, looking down into the bowl that held the lake, and he watched the corpses of dead dreams as they bobbed and revolved like maggoty pork in a gray soup.

After a time, he rose, walked back down from the mouth of the crater, and resumed his journey. He was crying.

When at last he reached the shore of the pancreatic sea, he found a great many things he had lost or given away when he was a child. He found a wooden machine gun on a tripod, painted olive drab, that made a rat-tat-tatting sound when a wooden handle was cranked. He found a set of toy soldiers, two companies, one Prussian and the other French, with a miniature Napoleon Bonaparte among them. He found a microscope kit with slides and petri

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dishes and racks of chemicals in nice little bottles, all of which bore uniform labels. He found a milk bottle filled with Indian head pennies. He found a hand puppet with the head of a monkey and the name *Roscoe* painted on the fabric glvoe with nail polish. He found a pedometer. He found a beautiful painting of a jungle bird that had been done with real feathers. He found a corncob pipe. He found a box of radio premiums: a cardboard detective kit with fingerprint dusting powder, invisible ink and a list of police band call codes; a ring with what seemed to be a plastic bomb attached, and when he pulled the red finned rear off the bomb, and cupped his hands around it in his palms, he could see little scintillae of light, deep inside the payload section; a china mug with a little girl and a dog running across one side; a decoding badge with a burning glass in the center of the red plastic dial.

But something was missing.

He could not remember what it was, but he knew it was important. As he had known it was important to recognize the shadowy figure who had moved past the surgical lamp at the top of the navel shaft, he knew whatever item was missing from this cache ... was very important.

He took the boat anchored beside the pancreatic sea, and put all the items from the cache in the bottom of the watertight box under one of the seats. He kept out the large, cathedral-shaped radio, and put it on the bench seat in front of the oarlocks.

Then he unbeached the boat, and ran it out into the crimson water, staining his ankles and calves and thighs, and climbed aboard, and started rowing across toward the islets. Whatever was missing, was very important.

The wind died when the islets were barely in sight on the horizon. Looking out across the blood-red sea, Talbot sat becalmed at latitude 38°54'N, longitude 77°00'13"W.

He drank from the sea and was nauseous. He played with the toys in the watertight box. And he listened to the radio.

He listened to a program about a very fat man who solved murders, to an adaptation of *The Woman in the Window* with Edward G. Robinson and Joan Bennett, to a story that began in a great railroad station, to a mystery about a wealthy man who could make himself invisible by clouding the minds of others so they could not see him, and he enjoyed a suspense drama narrated by a man named Ernest Chapell in which a group of people descended in a bathscaphe through the bottom of a mine shaft where, five miles down, they were attached by pterdactyls. Then he listened to the news, broadcast by Graham MacNamee. Among the human interest items at the close of the program, Talbot heard the

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unforgettable MacNamee voice say:

"Datelined Columbus, Ohio; September 24th, 1973. Martha Nelson has been in an institution for the mentally retarded for 98 years. She is 102 years old and was first sent to Orient State Institute near Orient, Ohio, on June 25th, 1875. Her records were destroyed in a fire in the institution some time in 1883, and no one knows for certain why she is at the institute. At the time she was committed, it was known as the Columbus State Institute for the Feeble-Minded. 'She never had a chance,' said Dr. A. Z. Soforenko, appointed two months ago as superintendent of the institution. He said she was probably a victim of 'eugenic alarm,' which he said was common in the late 1800's. At that time some felt that because humans were made 'in God's image' the retarded must be evil or children of the devil, because they were not whole human beings. 'During that time,' Dr. Soforenko said, 'it was believed if you moved feeble-minded people out of a community and into an institution, the taint would never return to the community.' He went on to add, 'She was apparently trapped in that system of thought. No one can ever be sure if she actually *was* feeble-minded; it is a wasted life. She is quite coherent for her age. She has no known relatives and has had no contact with anybody but Institution staff for the last 78 or 80 years.''

Talbot sat silently in the small boat, the sail hanging like a forlorn ornament from its single center-pole.

"I've cried more since I got inside you, Talbot, than I have in my whole life," he said, but could not stop. Thoughts of Martha Nelson, a woman of whom he had never before heard, of whome he would *never* have heard had it not been by chance by chance by chance he had heard by chance, by chance thoughts of her skirled through his mind like cold winds.

And the cold winds rose, and the sail filled, and he was no longer adrift, but was driven straight for the shore of the nearest islet. By chance.

He stood over the spot where Demeter's map had indicated he would find his soul. For a wild moment he chuckled, at the realization he had been expecting an anormous Maltese Cross or Capt. Kidd's "X" to mark the location. But it was only soft green sand, gentle as talc, blowing in dust-devils toward the blood-red pancreatic sea. The spot was midway between the low tide line and the enormous Bedlam-like structure that dominated the islet.

He looked once more, uneasily, at the fortress rising in the center of the tiny blemish of land. It was built square, seemingly carved from a single monstrous black rock ... perhaps from a cliff that had been thrust up during some natural

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disaster. It had no windows, no opening he could see, though two sides of its bulk were exposed to his view. It troubled him. It was a dark god presiding over an empty kingdom. He thought of the fish that would not die, and remembered Nietzsche's contention that gods died when they lost their supplicants.

He dropped to his knees and, recalling the moment months before when he had dropped to his knees to tear at the flesh of his atrophied umbilical cord, he began digging in the green and powdery sand.

The more he dug, the faster the sand ran back into the shallow bowl. As in a nightmare, it ran back ceaselessly. He stepped into the middle of the depression and began slinging dirt back between his legs with both hands, a human dog excavating for a bone.

When his fingertips encountered the edge of the box, he yelped with pain as his nails broke.

He dug around the outline of the box, and then forced his bleeding fingers down through the sand to gain purchase under the buried shape. He wrenched at it, and it came loose. Heaving with tensed muscles, he freed it.

He took it to the edge of the beach and sat down.

It was just a box. A plain wooden box, very much like an old cigar box, but larger. He turned it over and over and was not at all surprised to find it bore no arcane hieroglyphics or occult symbols. It wasn't that kind of treasure. Then he turned it right side up and pried open the lid. His soul was inside. It was not what he had expected to find, not at all. But it *was* what had been missing from the cache.

Holding it tightly in his fist, he walked up past the fast-filling hole in the green sand, toward the bastion on the high ground.

> *"We shall not cease from exploration.*
> *"And the end of all our exploring*
> *"Will be to arrive where we started*
> *"And know the place for the first time."*
>
> T.S. ELIOT

Once inside the brooding darkness of the fortress — and finding the entrance had been disturbingly easier than he had expected — there was no way to go but down. The wet, black stones of the switchback stairways led inexorably downward into the bowels of the structure, clearly far beneath the level of the pancreatic sea. The stairs were steep, and each step had been worn into smooth curves by the pressure of feet that had descended this way since the dawn of memory. It was dark, but not so dark that Talbot could not see his way. There was no light, however. He did not care to think about how that could be.

When he came to the deepest

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part of the structure, having passed no rooms or chambers or openings along the way, he saw a doorway across an enormous hall, set into the far wall. He stepped off the last of the stairs, and walked to the door. It was built of crossed iron bars, as black and moist as the stones of the bastion. Through the interstices he saw something pale and still in a far corner of what could have been a cell.

There was no lock on the door.

It swung open at his touch.

Whoever lived in this cell had never tried to open the door; or had tried and decided not to leave.

He moved into deeper darkness.

A long time of silence passed, and finally he stooped to help her to her feet. It was like lifting a sack of dead flowers, brittle and surrounded by dead air incapable of holding even the memory of fragrance.

He took her in his arms and carried her.

"Close your eyes against the light, Martha," he said, and started back up the long stairway to the golden sky.

Lawrence Talbot sat up on the operating table. He opened his eyes and looked at Victor. He smiled a peculiarly gentle smile. For the first time since they had been friends, Victor saw all torment cleansed from Talbot's face.

"It went well," he said. Talbot nodded.

They grinned at each other.

"How're your cryogenic facilities?" Talbot asked.

Victor's brows drew down in bemusement. "You want me to freeze you? I thought you'd want something more permanent ... say, in silver."

"Not necessary."

Talbot looked around. He saw her standing against the far wall by one of the Grasers. She looked back at him with open fear. He slid off the table, wrapping the sheet upon which he had rested around himself, a makeshift toga. It gave him a patrician look.

He went to her and looked down into her ancient face. "Nadja," he said, softly. After a long moment she looked up at him. He smiled and for an instant she was a girl again. She averted her gaze. He took her hand, and she came with him, to the table, to Victor.

"I'd be deeply grateful for a running account, Larry," the physicist said. So Talbot told him; all of it.

"My mother, Nadja, Martha Nelson, they're all the same," Talbot said, when he came to the end, "all wasted lives."

"And what was in the box?" Victor said.

"How well do you do with symbolism and cosmic irony, old friend?"

"Thus far I'm doing well enough with Jung and Freund," Victor said. He could not help but smile.

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Talbot held tightly to the old technician's hand as he said, "It was an old, rusted Howdy Doody button."

Victor turned around.

When he turned back, Talbot was grinning. "That's not cosmic irony, Larry ... it's slapstick," Victor said. He was angry. It showed clearly.

Talbot said nothing, simply let him work it out.

Finally Victor said, "What the hell's *that* supposed to signify, innocence?"

Talbot shrugged. "I suppose if I'd known, I wouldn't have lost it in the first place. That's what it was, and that's what it is. A little metal pinback about an inch and a half in diameter, with that cockeyed face on it, the orange hair, the toothy grin, the pug nose, the freckles, all of it, just the way he always was." He fell silent, then after a moment added. "It seems right."

"And now that you have it back, you don't *want* to die?"

"I don't *need* to die."

"And you want me to freeze you."

"Both of us."

Victor stared at him with disbelief. "For God's sake, Larry!"

Nadja stood quietly, as if she could not hear them.

"Victor, listen: Martha Nelson is in there. A wasted life. Nadja is out here. I don't know why or how or what did it ... but ... a wasted life. Another wasted life. I want you to create her mite, the same way

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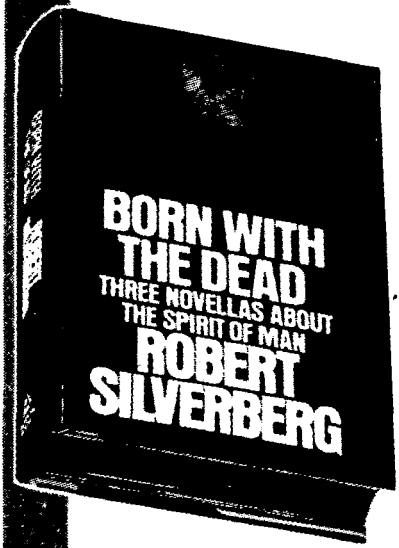

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you created mine, and send her inside. He's waiting for her, and he can make it right, Victor. All right, at last. He can be with her as she regains the years that were stolen from her. He can be — *I* can be — her father when she's a baby, her playmate when she's a child, her buddy when she's maturing, her boy friend when she's a young girl, her suitor when she's a young woman, her lover, her husband, her companion as she grows old. Let her be all the women she was never permitted to be, Victor. Don't steal from her a second time. And when it's over, it will start again..."

"*How,* for Christ sake, how the hell *how?* Talk sense, Larry! What is all this mataphysical crap?"

"I don't *know* how; it just is! I've been there, Victor, I was there for months, maybe years, and I never changed, never went to the wolf; there's no Moon there ... no night and no day, just golden light and warmth, and I can try to make restitution. I can give back two lives. *Please,* Victor!"

The physicist looked at him without speaking. Then he looked at the old woman. She smiled up at him, and then, with arthritic fingers, removed her clothing.

When she came through the collapsed lumen, Talbot was waiting for her. She looked very tired, and he knew she would have to rest before they attempted to cross the orange mountains. He helped her down from the ceiling of the cave, and laid her down on soft, pale yellow moss he had carried back from the islets of Langerhans during the long trek with Martha Nelson. Side-by-side, the two old women lay on the moss, and Nadja fell asleep almost immediately. He stood over them, looking at their faces.

They were identical.

Then he went out on the ledge and stood looking toward the spine of the orange mountains. The skeleton held no fear for his now. He felt a sudden sharp chill in the air and knew Victor had begun the cryogenic preservation.

He stood that way for a long time, the little metal button with the sly, innocent face of a mythical creature painted on its surface in four brilliant colors held tightly in his left hand.

After a while, he heard the crying of a baby, just one baby, from inside the cave, and turned to return for the start of the easiest journey he had ever made.

Somewhere, a terrible devil-fish suddenly flattened its gills, turned slowly bellyup, and sank into darkness.

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From the one writer in this issue whose name also appeared on the front cover of Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall 1949, a small story with a huge theme, about the day when a computer reads out the Final Extrapolation. Ladies and gentlemen, Theodore Sturgeon . . .

Blue Butter

by THEODORE STURGEON

Not having heard anything in so long, I went over to his lab and banged: *bip-bip, bam bam.* "Hey, come in," came Stromberg's voice, and it called my name.

Thirty-eight years I've known Stromberg, and that instant recognition of my knock, that immediate *Hey, come in!* are things I am very, very proud of. I never knew how I earned them. I learned from a third party one time that he liked having me around because he could talk with me about anything, anything at all, all the things that kept that great big brain of his seething along the way it did: physics, chemistry, art, music, electronics, poetry, food, love, politics, philosophy, humor. The third party had it wrong. He could talk *to* me about things. Not *with.* Nobody could talk with him about those things. Not all those things.

So in I came and through the dark front office to the lab with its rows of Miller flasks, with the hoods, the beautiful bewilder of crystal plumbing, the computer array with its visual mutter of indicator lights and readouts, red and orange and off-white to green, the huge pegboard over the electronics bench with its racks of tools and shiny black boxes and bundles of test leads like parades of trained baby snakes with chromium jaws. Through an inner door I could see something of the chemistry and bio lab, where, if the readouts muttered in lights, the gleam of glass was a complex

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whisper. Around the back wall, where I could not now see it, I knew there were cages and surgical instruments, a scrubbing sink with treadle-controlled valves, a stainless steel vet's examining table, microscopes, microtomes, two centrifuges, a sterilizer and a sink. Two entire walls, right to the ceiling, were glass-fronted cabinets of chemicals. Through a further door was, I knew, a library with its own computer terminal for instant retrieval of book locations and to tap into outside sources.

The main laboratory, where I stood just inside, was lit only by a wash of yellow light from the open door of the little room in which Stromberg kept nothing but his cot and his coffee, and a dazzling cone of "daylight" fluorescence from a point in the ceiling. On a low stool in the center of this disc of light sat Stromberg, half dressed — the top half — with his legs spraddled out due south and due west respectively, anointing his pubic area heavily with a thick blue-gray paste. He flashed me a smile, said "Nothing alarming," and went on with his work.

I had nothing to say and so said it while he finished what he was doing. He then wiped his fingers with a succession of tissues, replaced the cover on the jar of paste, placed a series of gauze pads on the affected area, where they stuck enthusiastically, and rose. I followed him into the cot-and-coffee room. "I needn't have said that," Stromberg grinned, "about being alarmed. Not to you. You have that virtue — did anyone ever tell you? You seem to be completely accepting. You're not judgmental. You don't apply moral and social yardsticks to what people do. You just take it in and you wait. That's kind of nice." He went into the little bathroom in the corner and washed his hands busily, like a surgeon. "Make coffee."

It was made. I fixed mine, honey and milk, and his, black, in big ceramic cups. I could have corrected his accolade. I have as many prejudices, make as many moral evaluations as the next man, and more than some. What Stromberg was not in a position to know was that I did not, would not, could not apply any of them to him, and never had. Just for an immediate example, when he came out of the bathroom wearing only a polo shirt, with his masculine apostrophe protruding from a nest of stuck-on white gauze slowly staining grey, it could not be called ludicrous. Stromberg was never ludicrous. Not to me.

He slid a drawer out of the wall and removed a pair of white boxer shorts and a disposable white coverall. He put them on and slid his feet into throwaway slippers,

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took from another drawer a large plastic bag, banged it open, and handed it to me. He stripped the cot completely, rolling up the foam mattress, sheets and blanket, and while I held the bag open, manhandled the whole bundle inside. He twisted the top closed, padded out to the office, and came back with a big bright tag reading CONTAMINATED. "Go wash your hands," he said, dragging the bag off toward the outer door. "Nothing lethal," he reassured me as I went into the bathroom.

In the bathroom were graffiti. Not many.

NOTHING IS ALWAYS ABSOLUTELY SO.

"$E=MC^2$ may after all be a local phenomenon."

—*Albert Einstein*

"Any answer is not necessarily the only answer."

—*Charles Fort.*

— and, surprisingly

YOU BLOW MY MIND

and

I'LL SUCK YOURS

"Joey broke his thumb," I said, comeing out of the bathroom.

"Broke? How? When? On what? Is it —"

I put out my hands placatingly. Stromberg can talk at you sometimes like over a gunsight. "Clean break, simple fracture, three weeks ago, no complications. Stuck his thumb through the spokes of the pulley on his gemstone tumbler."

"Why isn't there a guard on it?"

"There is a guard on it. He opened it up to show another kid why there was a guard on it."

Tension flowed out of his shoulders and neck and tugged at the corners of his mouth as it went away. He held up his left hand, wiggled the little finger. Flexed, it was a little out of line at the second joint. Never noticed that before. "Did the exact same thing when I was his age," he said. "How about that. ...How's Curie?"

"Perfect. Just beginning to find out that being a girl's not the same as being a kid."

He liked that. I'd known he would. He twinkled at me and gently gibed, "Incipient chauvinism?"

"Mine, not hers. Never hers."

We went into the main lab where he picked up the ointment and tissues he had left on the floor by the stool. Tidy man. He asked it, finally; he had to:

"Mitty?"

"Just fine. Just fine. Took the kids to Arrowhead for a week. Got a new green cape."

"Look, is she happy?"

I had to wait a bit to answer that. "Happier," I said carefully.

"That figures." He nodded, and then nodded again. "No place to go

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but up. I — I'll drop around soon, see them."

"Good idea."

He shot me a special look of his. It makes you blink when he does that. Lasers don't need gunsights. "You see them a lot."

"Mm." Almost every day, a lot of nights, but there was no need to say it.

"That's good." He was still a moment, then made a characteristic gesture of his, raising his hands, letting them fall to slap his thighs. Change of subject. He went to the office doorway and hit the wall-switches. Hooded lights over the far benches winked on, and the aching cone from the ceiling went out. It was a lot pleasanter that way.

"Everything's a part of everything anyway," he said.

"Who said that?" For I knew it was a quote.

"The singer Donovan. Also the *I Ching*, the joss sticks, divination by sheep's guts, and me."

"Okay." Then I waited.

"'To measure a circle, begin anywhere.'"

I knew who that was. That was Charles Fort.

He finally found a place to begin. And he was right; he could have begun anywhere. I knew this man, I'd been with him in this mood before. It drove some people past all patience, the way he moved from one thing to another, however authoritatively; they wanted a neat title for it all, like the label on a jar of ointment, letting you know ahead of time what was inside, what it was made of, what it was for. With Stromberg, you had to wait while he made a brick, set it aside, wait while he cut a beam, set it aside, wait while he forged nails and roofing tar and conduit and sash. When he was done it would be a structure; you could trust him for that.

"Some people," he said, "are gifted — maybe it's 'afflicted' — with a different time scale from other people. They don't think in biographical time — I mean, *my* era, things since *I* was born, or in historical time, the miserable tick of time —" he snapped his fingers — "since we began to write our adventures and our lies about our adventures. They think in geological time, in astronomical time, in cosmological time. I'm talking about the idiots who involve themselves in science fiction, reading it, writing it. Some scientists. Some philosophers."

"Some mystics." I shouldn't have interrupted. I do know better. But he almost conceded the point.

"Maybe so. Maybe, though I tend to think that a lot of them, and a lot of composers and artists and the more broad-spectrum theologians, take off at right angles to

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what I see as the linearity of things, the progress from cause to effect. I dunno. Maybe that gives them a perspective as important as cosmological-time thinking. I dunno. I dunno. They're not mutually exclusive. Room for everyone. It's a big universe."

We sat down. Stromberg literally, one hunker at a time, sat on his hands. "Trying like hell not to scratch," he explained. "Anyway, people with a mental set like that are regarded as something less than human. Cold. Uncaring, lacking in something...it isn't like that. It isn't. It's just that marriage contracts and chivalry and whether or not you report to church or carry the clan bone through your nose, these things can't weigh too heavily in the presence of continental drift and the birth and death of stars. You can love her and rub her feet and try to get tickets for the opening, to make her happy, but what do you do with the recognition that she, and you, and all your works and thoughts, are trivialities? Especially when you can't say it to her. Never. Never."

"Oh."

He shot me a look. "I think I heard a light go on."

"You did. I never really knew before. More — *she* never knew, doesn't know. She thinks she failed you in some way. She takes it hard, the papers: NOBEL LAUREATE AT RACE TRACK. Dr. Stromberg seen in Hollywood in the company of. Dr. Stromberg in temporary custody after waterfront brawl. She thinks she did all that, some way."

"Well, she didn't." He waved his hand at the computer wall. "That did. The big extrapolation. Hey, I held your head through something once. Your kid sister."

I nodded. It still knotted my stomach. "Ran through a plate-glass door. Face, hands, arms, legs. Squirting twenty jets of blood."

"Horrible," he agreed. "But after the initial emergency was over and they had her put together again and on the way back, what was driving you right off the track?"

I remembered. "'What did she do to deserve this?'"

"Right. And I was able to tell you that 'right' and 'wrong' and 'deserve' belong to some other scale, some other country, language, some other set than the cause-and-effect sequentiality that resulted in all that virgin's-blood."

"It helped."

"Sure it did. Unfortunately, there's no way to pour the same balm on my wife without insulting her."

I said, very carefully, "It was very sudden. One day, a set-in-his-ways family man. The next, lawyers' and bankers' letters, a huge settlement, and the day after, the headlines begin. It's too easy to

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assign it to some middle-aged itch, the pursuit of vanishing youth. Something happened."

He nodded, and rapped his head, replacing the hand under his right buttock. "The whole thing was there, had been for a long time. But on that day the lights went on for *me.*" Again he nodded at the computers.

I just waited until he came to some internal decision and began to speak. "Listen:

"She wounds you, as a rose will wound,

Not always, as expected, with its thorn.

A rose will always wound you with its rose."

"Gooseflesh."

"Gooseflesh. Right. Harry Martinson, a Swede wrote it. Gooseflesh for Bach's *Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor,* for the last movement of Beethoven's 9th, for a sailplane, for Nureyev, for Gagarin who said, "I am an eagle." Gooseflesh for the groining of a Gothic cathedral and for Ellington and for Dylan Thomas. Gooseflesh, if you like, for *pons asinorum* and the little fingernail of your first child. But by what towering arrogance do we attach any importance or permanence to any of these things? Importance to us, whose things they are, of course naturally. But to a *louse?* What does human transcendance have to do with a louse, except that it might make a single human sit a little stiller to be bitten?

"And by what towering conceit do we assume that a louse has not its own Shakespeares and Mozarts? No one ever thought of that — not ever. We will tolerate a louse by not thinking about it, sometimes by not believing it exists, but when we become aware, we smother it with blue butter, never dreaming or caring that all the lice might be sharing the equivalent, to lice, of *'A rose-red city, half as old as time.'"*

He leaned forward and spoke with a terrible intensity. "All right, I'll tell you what I saw when the lights went on, when the computer read me out the final extrapolation. We are all lice on the earth, life living off life, down to the bacteria which live off the substance of the earth itself. And up to now the earth hasn't known nor cared. Now it knows, now it cares. Not as a conscious entity, of course; I'm not giving you the *'When the Earth Screamed'* kind of poppycock. Linear causation: the rare accident of our atmosphere and its special orchestration of components produced life, and now life has made itself manifest enough to upset the balance."

"Ecologically —" I began to say.

"Damn it, I'm not giving you more of that popular and fasion-

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able drone about ecology and conservation. There is no conservation that will do any good; we're on the slide. The death of the oceans and the loss of a breathable atmosphere are not the end of the world — the world, per se, is not going to end, not for billions of years more.

"Earth has always, in its numb passive way, fought us back. The struggle for existence, for life, has always been a struggle because by its nature earth didn't want us. Like us with the lice, we can live with it until we itch. Well, we've itched the earth and when we didn't respond to a scratch or two, to a plague or a quake, then time came for the blue butter.

"We're going back now, all the way to methane and ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, water vapor and hydrogen for an atmosphere, back to the fifty-year rains and a land unprotected by an ozone layer. It won't be exactly the primordial atmosphere, but something very like it, at least as far as terrestrial life is concerned. It won't be a triviality like another Ice Age. It'll be clear back to before-the-beginning.

"*It will be.* I am not fantasizing, I am not guessing. It will be so.

"So learning that, I looked at myself — fifty-one years old, faithful, reliable, a good credit risk. Never drank, fought, gambled, picked up a woman at a bar, never skated, skiied, never ate haggis or kous-kous. So now I am going to live till I die, I am going to feel, I am going to be. I have money and so far, my health, and I am by God going to use them!"

For some time I couldn't speak. When I could, I nodded at the computers and asked, "Then there's really no hope?"

He laughed out loud. "Hope? Of course there's hope! By its very nature, Earth is doomed to have parasites!" He freed one hand and patted his crotch. "During that deluge of mercurial ointment — an old-fashioned remedy but a good one — among the death-cries of the crab civilization I heard the voice of one old louse-philosopher, who said, 'Have hope, my friends, have hope, he is but preparing the ground for another dose of crabs.' I'm quite certain that he was right, and I do hope for the future of lousedom that the new clean environment produces a crab that does not itch."

I got up then and left, and went to find Mrs. Stromberg and, if I could, tell her why.

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Dr. Asimov's Black Widowers mysteries have been published in *Ellery Queen's* and were recently collected in TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOWERS (Doubleday), F&SF's readers are probably best equipped to anticipate the solution to this special new addition to the series.

Nothing Like Murder

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Emmanuel Rubin looked definitely haggard when he arrived at the monthly banquet of the Black Widowers. Whereas ordinarily he gave the clear impression of being a foot taller than the five foot five which literal minds would consider his height to be, he seemed shrunken this time into his natural limits. His thick glasses seemed to magnify less, and even his beard, sparse enough at best, straggled limply.

"You look your age," said the resplendent Mario Gonzalo. "What's wrong?"

"And you look like an overdressed D'Artagnan," said Rubin with marked lack of snap.

"All we Latins are handsome," said Gonzalo. "But, really, what's wrong?"

"I'm short about six hours sleep," said Rubin, aggrievedly. "A deadline trapped me when I wasn't looking. In fact, the deadline was two days ago."

"Did you finish?"

"Just about. I'll have it in tomorrow."

"Who done it this time, Manny?"

"You'll just damn well have to buy the book and find out." He sank down in a chair and said, "Henry!" making a long gesture with thumb and forefinger.

Henry, the perennial waiter of the Black Widowers banquets, obliged at once, and Rubin said nothing until about a quarter of the contents had been transferred into his esophagus. Then he said, "Where's everybody?" It was as though he had noticed for the first time that he and Gonzalo were the only two present.

"We're early," said Gonzalo, shrugging.

"I swear I didn't think I'd make

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it. You artists don't have deadlines, do you?"

"I wish the demand were great enough to make deadlines necessary," said Gonzalo, grimly. "Sometimes we're driven, but we can be more independent than you word people. They recognize the demands of creativity in art. It's not something you can hack out at the typewriter."

"Listen," began Rubin, then thought better of it and said, "I'll get you next time. Remind me to describe your cockamamie crayon scribbles to you."

Gonzalo laughed. "Manny, why don't you write a best seller and be done with it? If you're just going to write mystery novels to a limited audience, you'll never get rich."

Rubin's chin lifted. "Think I can't write a best seller? I can do it anytime I want to. I've analyzed it. In order to write a best seller you have to hit one of the only two markets big enough to support one. It's either the housewife, or the college kids. Sex and scandal get the housewife; pseudo-intellect gets the college kids. I could do either if I wanted to, but I am not interested in sex and scandal, and I don't want to take the effort to lower my intellect so far as to make it pseudo."

"Try, Mannie, try. You underestimate the full measure of the incapacity of your intellect. Besides," Gonzalo added hastily to stave off a retort, "don't tell me that it's only the pseudo-intellect that gets through to the college students."

"Sure!" said Rubin, indignantly. "Do you know what goes big with the college crowd? *Chariot of the Gods,* which is sheer nonsense. I'd call it science fiction except that it's not that good. Or *The Greening of America,* which was a fad book — one month they were all reading it because it's the in-thing to do, the next month it's out."

"What about Vonnegut's books? What about *Future Shock,* Manny? I heard you say you liked *Future Shock.*"

"So-so," said Rubin, who closed his eyes and took another sip.

Gonzalo said, "Even Henry doesn't take you seriously. Look at him grinning."

Henry was setting the table. "Merely a smile of pleasure, Mr. Gonzalo," he said, and, indeed, his smooth and sixtyish face radiated exactly that emotion. "Mr. Rubin has recommended a number of books that have been college favorites to me, and I have read them with pleasure usually. I suspect he likes more books than he will admit."

Rubin ignored Henry's remark and brought his weary eyes to bear

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on Gonzalo. "Besides, what do you mean *even* Henry. He reads a hell of a lot more books than you do."

"Maybe, but he doesn't read *your* books."

"Henry!" cried Rubin.

Henry said, "I have bought and read several of Mr. Rubin's mysteries."

Gonzalo said, "And what do you think of them? Tell the truth. I'll protect you."

"I enjoy them. They are very good of their kind. Of course, I lack a sense of the dramatic and once the dramatic is discounted, it is possible to see the solution — where the author allows it."

At that moment, the others began to arrive and Henry was busied with the drinks.

It had been a very long time since the Black Widowers had had a foreigner as guest, and Drake, who was host, basked in the glory of it and smiled quietly through the wreathed smoke from his eternal cigarette. Moreover, the guest was a Russian, a real Russian from the Soviet Union, and Geoffrey Avalon, who had studied Russian during World War II had the chance to use what he could remember.

Avalon, standing tall, and speaking with a severe and steady syllable-by-syllable stress, sounded as lawyerlike as though he were addressing a Russian jury. The Russian, whose name was Grigori Deryashkin seemed pleased and answered in slow, distinct phrases until Avalon ran down.

Deryashkin was a stocky man in a loosely fitting grey suit, a white shirt and dark tie. He had blunt features, large teeth, an easy smile, and English that consisted of an adequate vocabulary, an uncertain grammar, and a marked but by no means unpleasant accent.

"Where'd you get him?" asked Thomas Thrumbull of Drake in a low voice as Deryashkin turned away momentarily from Avalon to take a large vodka on the rocks from Henry.

"He's a science writer." said Drake. "He came to visit the laboratory to get some details on our work on hormonal insecticides. We got to talking, and it occurred to me that he might enjoy hobnobbing with some filthy capitalists."

That Deryashkin enjoyed the meal was certain. He ate with huge gusto, and Henry, having caught the spirit of hands across the sea — or perhaps to show off America at its most munificent — casually, and with the smooth unnoticeability that was his professional characteristic, brought him seconds of everything.

Roger Halsted watched that process wistfully, but said nothing. Ordinarily, second helpings were

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frowned upon at the Black Widower banquets on the theory that a swinishly crammed stomach detracted from the brilliance of the postprandial conversation, and Halsted, who taught mathematics at a junior high school and who often felt the need of caloric support in consequence, most definitely disagreed with that.

"From what part of the Soviet Union do you come, Mr. Deryashkin?" asked Trumbull.

"From Tula, hundred ninety kilometers south of Moscow. You have heard of Tula?"

There was a moment of silence and then Avalon said, magisterially, "It played a role, I believe, in the Hitlerian War."

"Yes, yes." Deryashkin seemed gratified. "In the late fall of 1941, the drive for Moscow reached out claws to the north and to the south. The advanced German forces reached Tula. In the cold and the snow we held them; they did not take Tula. They never took Tula. We called out the home guard then; boys, old men. I was sixteen years old and carried a rifle made in our own factory. We make best samovars in Russia, too; Tula is notable in war and peace. Later in the war, I was with artillery. I reached Leipzig, but not Berlin. —We were friends then, Soviet Union and America. May we stay friends." He lifted his glass.

There was a murmur of agreement, and Deryashkin's good humor was further strengthened by the dessert. "What is this?" he asked, pointing with his fork, after his first mouthful.

"Pecan pie," said Drake.

"Very good, Very rich."

Henry had a second piece of pie on the table for Deryashkin almost as soon as the first had been devoured, and then, having noted Halsted's eyes following the progress of that piece, quietly placed a similar second helping before him as well. Halsted looked in either direction, found himself studiously ignored, and fell to cheerfully.

Trumbull leaned toward Drake and whispered, "Does your guest know the system of grilling?"

Drake whispered, "I tried to explain but I'm not sure he really got it. Anyway, let's not ask him the usual opener about how he justifies his existence. He may consider that an anti-Soviet remark."

Trumbull's tanned face crinkled into a silent snarl. Then he said, "Well, it's your baby. Get it started."

Henry was quietly filling the small brandy glasses when Drake coughed, stubbed out his cigarette, and tapped his water glass with his fork. "It's time," he said, "to deal with our guest from abroad, and I suggest that Manny, who has been

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suspiciously silent throughout the meal, undertake the —"

Deryashkin was leaning back in his chair, his jacket unbuttoned, his tie loosened. He said, "We come to the conversation now, and I suggest, with the permission of the company, that we talk about your great city of New York. I have been here for two weeks now, and I will say it is a city of the damned."

He smiled into the vacuum the remark had created and nodded his head jovially. "A city of the damned," he said again.

Trumbull said, "You're talking about Wall Street, I suppose — that nest of imperialist bloodsuckers?" (Drake kicked his shin.)

But Deryashkin shook his head and shrugged. "Wall Street? I haven't been there and it is of no interest. Considering condition of your dollar, I doubt Wall Street has much power these days. Besides, we are friends and I have no wish to speak phrases such as imperialist bloodsuckers. That is part of the newspaper cliche like dirty Commie rat. Is that not so?"

"All right," said Rubin. "Let's not use ugly words. Let's just use nice words like city of the damned. Why is New York a city of the damned?"

"It is a city of terror! You have crime everywhere. You live in fear. You do not walk the streets. Your parks are power vacuums in which only hoodlums and hooligans can stroll. You cower behind locked doors."

Avalon said, "I suppose that New York shares the problems that beset all large and crowded cities these days, including, I am sure, the large cities of the Soviet Union. Still, these problems are not as bad as painted."

Deryashkin lifted both arms. "Do not misunderstand. You are my excellent hosts and I have no wish to offend. I recognize the condition to be widespread, but in a city like New York, gorgeous in many ways, very advanced and wealthy in many places — it seems wrong, ironic, that there should be so much fear. Murders openly planned in the streets! Actual war of one segment of the population with another!"

Rubin broke in with his beard bristling combatively for the first time that evening. "I don't want to offend any more than you do, comrade, but I think you've got a bad case of believing your own propaganda. There's crime, yes, but for the most part the city is peaceful and well off. Have *you* been mugged, sir? Have *you* been molested in any way?"

Deryashkin shook his head. "So far, not. I will be honest. So far I have been treated with all possible courtesy; not least, here. I thank you. For the most part, though, I

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have been in affluent sections. I have not been where your troubles are."

Rubin said, "Then how do you know there are troubles except for what you read and hear in unfriendly media?"

"Ah," said Deryashkin, "but I did venture into park — near the river. There I hear a murder planned. This is not what I read in any newspaper or what I am told by any enemy or ill-wisher of your country. It is the truth. I *hear* it."

Rubin, his glasses seeming to concentrate the fury in his eyes into an incandescent glare, pointed a somewhat trembling finger and said, "Look —"

But Avalon was on his feet, and from his better than six feet, he easily dominated the table. "Gentlemen," he said in his commanding baritone, "let's stop right here. I have a suggestion to make. Our guest, Tovarishch Deryashkin, seems to think he has heard murder planned openly in the streets. I confess I don't understand what he means by that, but I would suggest we invite him to tell us in detail what he heard and under what circumstances. After all, he could be right and it could be an interesting story."

Drake nodded his head vigorously. "I take host's privilege and direct that Mr. Deryashkin tell us the story of the planned murder from the beginning — and, Mannie, you let him tell it."

Deryashkin said, "I will be glad to tell the story as accurately as I can, for what it is. There are not many details, but that it involves murder, there can be no doubt. —Perhaps before I start, more brandy. —Thank you, my friend." He said amiably to Henry.

Deryashkin sipped at his brandy and said, "It happened late this morning. Zelykov and I — Zelykov is colleague, brilliant man in biology and genetics, held down a bit in day of Lysenko, but excellent. He does not speak English well and I act to interpret for him. Zelykov and I were at the Biology Department at Columbia University for a couple of hours this morning.

"When we left, we were not certain how to follow up the leads we had received. We were not entirely sure about significance of what we have heard or what we should next do. We went down toward the river — Hudson River, which is very polluted, I understand — and we looked across to other shore, which is very pretty from distance, but commercialized, I am told, and at highway, which is in between, and not so pretty.

"It was a nice day. Quite cold, but cold days do not frighten a Russian from Tula. We sit and talk

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in Russian, and it is a pleasure to do so. Zelykov has only a few words of English, and even for me it is a strain to talk English constantly. It is a great language; I would not be offensive; the language of Shakespeare and your own Mark Twain and Jack London, and I enjoy it. But," he cocked his head to one side and thrust out his lips, "it is a strain, and it is pleasant to speak one's native language and be fluent.

"But I mention that we are speaking Russian only because it plays a part in the story. You see, two young men, who don't look like hooligans, approach. They have short hair, they are shaved, they look well-to-do. I am not really paying attention at first. I am aware they are coming, but I am interested in what I am saying, and I am not really clear that they are going to speak to us till they do. I don't remember exactly what they say, but it was like, 'Do you mind if we sit?'

"Naturally, I don't mind. There is two halves to the bench, with a metal dividing in the middle. On each half is more than enough for two people. Zelykov and I, we are in one half; these two young men can be in the other half. I say, 'Be our guests. You are welcome. Sit down and relax.' Something like that.

"But — and this is the important thing — I have just been speaking Russian to Zelykov. So when the young men asked the question, I answered, without thinking, still in Russian. I would have corrected this, but they sat down at once and did not pay more attention to us. So I thought, well, it is done, and what more is necessary to say.

"You see, however," and here he paused, and tapped his nose with his forefinger, "the significance of this?"

Rubin said, at once, "No. I don't."

"They thought we were foreigners."

"And so you are," said Rubin.

"Ah," said Deryashkin, "but foreigners who could not speak English."

Trumbull interposed, "And how does that matter, Mr. Deryashkin?"

Deryashkin transferred his forefinger to the palm of his left hand, marking each emphasis. "*If* they think we speak English, they take another bench; but *since* they say to themselves, 'Aha, we have here foreigners who will not understand us,' they sit right down next to us and talk freely; and, of course, I listen. I talk to Zelykov, but I listen, too."

Halsted, staring at his empty brandy glass, said, "Why did you listen? Did they seem suspicious?"

"To me, yes," said Deryashkin.

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"They are students, since we are near Columbia University and they carry books. I know, of course, that the American student body is very activist and, in some cases, destructive."

Rubin interrupted hotly, "Three years ago. Not now."

"Of course," said Deryashkin, genially. "You defend, I do not criticize. I understand that many students were motivated by hostility to war, and this I understand. Any humane idealist would be in favor of peace. Yet it is undeniable that under cover of idealism there are undesirable elements, too. Besides, we are sitting in a park. It is empty, and there is not someone we can count on for help if the students are armed and hostile. Also, it is well known that in New York bystanders do not interfere when a criminal action is taking place.

"I do not actually think we are in immediate danger, but it would be foolhardy to let attention wander. I keep aware of the hooligans and, without looking at them, I listen a bit."

Rubin said, "Why do you call them hooligans? They haven't done anything so far except to take a seat, and they asked permission politely before they did that much."

"The politeness," said Deryashkin, "cannot be given too much credit. That was only to check what it was we were. And I call them hooligans because that is what they were. What they were talking about was a plan for murder."

There was a distinct air of incredulity about the table as Deryashkin paused at this point for effect. Finally, Avalon asked, "Are you sure of that, Gospodin Deryashkin?"

"Quite sure. They used the word 'murder.' They used it several times. I did not hear all that they said clearly. They were talking in low voices — a natural precaution. I was also talking, as was Zelykov."

Rubin leaned back in his chair. "So you caught only scraps of conversation. You can't be sure there was anything wrong with it."

"I heard the word 'murder,' Mr. Rubin," said Deryashkin seriously. "I heard it several times. You know English better than I do, I'm sure, but you tell me if there is any word in the English language that is like 'murder.' If they say 'mother' I can hear the difference. I can pronounce the English 'th' and I can hear it; so I do not put a 'd' where it does not belong. I hear the initial letter 'm' clearly; so it is not — uh — 'girder,' let us say, which I think is word for steel beams in building construction. I hear 'murder.' What else does one talk about but killing if one speaks of 'murder'?"

Gonzalo said, "They could be

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using the word in a colloquial expression. If they were discussing an upcoming football game with another college, they could say, 'We'll murder the bums!'"

Deryashkin said, "They are talking too seriously for that, my dear sir. It is not a football game they discuss. It is low tones, serious, very serious, and there is also to be taken into account what else they said."

"Well, what else did they say?" asked Trumbull.

"There was something about 'lying in the shadows' which is something you don't do for football games. They would lie in the shadows waiting to trap someone, catch them by surprise, *murder* them."

"Did they say all that?" demanded Rubin.

"No, no. This is my interpretation." Deryashkin frowned. "They also said something about tying them up. 'Tie them up in the dark.' That they did say. I remember distinctly. There was also talk about a signal."

"What signal?" asked Avalon.

"A ring of a bell. That I heard, too. It is, I think a well-organized conspiracy. They will lie in wait at night; there will be a signal when the right person is there or when the coast is clear; one ring of some kind; then they tie up the victim or victims and murder them.

"There is no question about this in my mind," Deryashkin continued. "One hooligan is doing all the talking at first — as though he is reciting the plan — and when he is finished, the other one says, 'Right! You have it perfect! We'll go over some of the other things, but you'll make it.' And he warned him against talking."

"Against talking?" said Rubin.

"Several times it was mentioned. About talking. By both of them. Very seriously."

Rubin said, "You mean they sat down next to two strangers, talked their heads off, and warned each other against talking?"

Deryashkin said, rather tightly, "I said several times they assumed we could not speak English."

Trumbull said, "Look, Manny, let's not make a fight out of this. Maybe Mr. Deryashkin has something here. There are radical splinter groups among the student bodies of America. There have been buildings blown up."

"There have been no cold-blooded murders planned and carried out," said Rubin.

"Always a first time for everything," said Avalon, frowning, and clearly concerned.

Trumbull said, "Well, Mr. Deryashkin, did you do anything?"

"Do anything?" Deryashkin looked puzzled. "To hold them, you mean. It was not so easy. I am

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listening, trying to understand, learn as much as possible, without showing that I am listening. If they see I am listening, they will see we understand and will stop talking. We might even be in danger. So I don't look at them while I am listening, and suddenly it is silent and they are walking away."

"You didn't go after them?" asked Drake.

Deryashkin shook his head emphatically. "If they are hooligans, they are armed. It is well known that handguns are sold freely in America and that it is very common for young people to carry arms. They are young and look strong, and I am myself nearly fifty and am a man of peace. A war veteran, but a man of peace. As for Zelykov, he has a bad chest, and on him I cannot count. If the hooligans leave, let them leave."

"Did you report anything to the police?" asked Halsted.

"I? Of what use? What evidence have I? What can I say? I see right now that you are all skeptical and you are intelligent men who know my position and see that I am a man of responsibility, a scientific man. Yet you are skeptical. What would the policeman know but that I have heard these scattered things. And I am a Soviet citizen. It is possible a policeman would accept the word of a Russian foreigner against American young men. And I would not wish to be involved in what could become a large scandal that would affect my career and perhaps embarrass my country. So I say nothing. I do nothing. Can you suggest something to say or do?"

"Well, no," said Avalon, deliberately, "but if we wake up one of these mornings and discover that murder has been done and that some group of college students are responsible, we would not exactly feel well. *I* would not."

"Nor I," said Trumbull, "but I see Mr. Deryashkin's position. On the basis of what he's told us, he would certainly have a hard time interesting a hard-boiled police sergeant. — Unless we had some hard evidence. Have you any idea what the students looked like, Mr. Deryashkin?"

"Not at all. I saw them for a moment as they approached. After that, I did not look at them, merely listened. When they left, it was only their backs I saw. Nothing unusual."

"You could not possibly identify them, then?"

"Under no conditions. I have thought about it. I said to myself, if the school authorities were to show me pictures of every young man who attended Columbia University, I could not tell which were the two who had sat on the bench."

"Did you notice their clothes?" asked Gonzalo.

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"It was cold, so they wear coats," said Deryashkin. "Gray coats, I think. I did not really notice."

"Gray coats," muttered Rubin.

"Did they wear anything unusual," said Gonzalo. "Funny hats, mittens, checked scarves."

"Are you going to identify them that way?" said Rubin. "You mean you're thinking of going to the police and they'll say, 'That must be Mittens Garfinkel, well-known hooligan. Always wears mittens.'"

Gonzalo said patiently, "Any information —"

But Deryashkin interposed. "Please, gentlemen, I noticed nothing of that kind. I cannot give any help in clothing."

Halsted said, "How about your companion, Mr. — uh —"

"Zelykov."

"How about Mr. Zelykov?" Halsted's voice seemed thoughtful. "If he noticed anything."

"No, he never looked at them. He was discussing genes and DNA. He didn't even know they were there."

Halsted placed his palm delicately on his high forehead and brushed back at nonexistent hair. He said, "You can't be sure, can you? Is there any way you can call him up right now and ask?"

"It would be useless," protested Deryashkin. "I know. Believe me. When they left, I said to him in Russian, 'Can you imagine the criminality of those hooligans?' and he said 'What hooligans?' I said, 'Those that are leaving.' And he shrugged and did not look but kept on talking. It was getting cold even for us and we left. He knows nothing."

"That's very frustrating," said Halsted.

"Hell," said Rubin. "There's nothing to this at all. I don't believe it."

"You mean I am lying?" said Deryashkin, frowning.

"No," said Rubin. "I mean it's a misinterpretation. What you heard can't involve murder."

Deryashkin, still frowning, said, "Do all you gentlemen believe that what I heard can't involve murder?"

Avalon, keeping his eyes on the tablecloth in some embarrassment, said, "I can't really say I am certain that a murder is being planned, but I think we ought to *act* as though a murder is being planned. If we are wrong, we have done nothing worse than make fools of ourselves. If we are right, we might save one or more lives. Do the rest of you agree with that?"

There was an uncertain murmur that seemed to be agreement, but Rubin clenched a hostile fist and said, "What the devil do you mean by acting, Jeff? What are we supposed to do?"

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Avalon said, "We might go to the police. It might be difficult for Mr. Deryashkin to get a hearing, but if one of us — or more — back him —"

"How would that help?" said Rubin, sardonically. "If there were fifty million of us introducing our friend here, the evidence would still boil down to the uncertain memory of one man who recalls a few scraps of conversation and who cannot identify the speakers?"

"In that," said Deryashkin, "Mr. Rubin is right. Besides, I will not take part. It is *your* city, *your* country, and I will not interfere. Nothing could be done in any case, and when the murder takes place, it will be too bad, but it cannot be helped."

"Nothing will happen," said Rubin.

"No?" said Deryashkin. "How then can you explain what I heard. If all else is ignored, there is yet the word 'murder.' I heard it clearly more than once, and it is a word that cannot be mistaken. In the English language there is nothing like 'murder' that I could have taken for that word. And surely if people speak of murder there must be murder in the wind. You are, I think, the only one here, Mr. Rubin, who doubts it."

There was a soft cough from one end of the table. Henry, who had cleared away the coffee cups said, apologetically, "Not the only one, Mr. Deryashkin. I doubt it, too. In fact, I am quite certain that what the young men said was harmless."

Deryashkin turned in his seat. He looked surprised. He said, "Comrade Waiter, if you —"

Trumbull said hastily, "Henry is a member of the Black Widowers. Henry, how can you be certain?"

Henry said, "If Mr. Deryashkin will kindly consent to answer a few questions, I think we will all be certain."

Deryashkin nodded his head vigorously and spread out his arms. "Ask! I will answer."

Henry said, "Mr. Deryashkin, I believe you said that the park was empty and that no one was in sight to help if the young men proved violent. Did I understand correctly? Were the other benches in the park area unoccupied?"

"Those we could see were empty," said Deryashkin, readily. "Today was not a pleasant day for park sitting."

"Then why do you suppose the young men came to your bench, the only one which was occupied?"

Deryashkin laughed briefly and said, "No mystery, my friend. The day was cold and our bench was the only one in the sun. It was why we picked it ourselves."

"But if they were going to

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discuss murder, surely they would prefer a bench to themselves even if it meant being a little on the cold side."

"You forget. They thought we were foreigners who could not speak or understand English. The bench *was* empty in a way."

Henry shook his head. "That does not make sense. They approached you and asked to sit down before you spoke Russian. They had no reason to think you couldn't understand English at the time they approached."

Deryashkin said, testily, "They might have heard us talking Russian from a distance and checked it out."

"And sat down almost at once, as soon as you spoke Russian? They didn't test you any farther? They didn't ask if you understood English? With murder in the wind, they were satisfied with a small Russian comment from you, guessed they would be safe, and sat down to discuss openly a hideous crime? Surely if they were conspirators they would have stayed as far away from you as possible in the first place, and even if they were irresistibly attracted to the sun, they would have put you through a much more cautious testing process. The logical interpretation of the events, at least to me, would seem to be that whatever they had to discuss was quite harmless, that they wanted a bench in the sun, and they did not at all care whether they were overheard or not."

"And the word 'murder'?" said Deryashkin with heavy sarcasm, "That, too, then, must be quite, quite harmless."

"It is the use of the word 'murder'," said Henry, "that convinces me that the entire conversation was harmless, sir. It seems to me, surely, that no one would use the word 'murder' in connection with their own activities, only with those of others. If you yourself are going to murder, you speak of it as 'rubbing him out,' 'taking him for a ride,' 'getting rid of him,' or, if you'll excuse the expression, sir, 'liquidating him.' You might even say 'killing him,' but surely no one would casually speak of murdering someone. It is too ugly a word; it demands euphemism."

"Yet they said it, Mr. Waiter," said Deryashkin. "Talk as you will, you won't argue me out of having heard that word clearly more than once."

"They did not say what you heard, perhaps."

"And how is that possible, my friend. Eh?"

Henry said, "Even with the best will in the world and with the most rigid honesty, Mr. Deryashkin, one can make mistakes in interpreting

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what one hears, especially — please excuse me — if the language is not native to you. For instance, you say the expression 'tie them up' was used. Might it not be that you heard them say 'bind them' and that you interpreted that as 'tie them up.'"

Deryashkin seemed taken aback. He thought about it for a while. He said, "I cannot swear I did not hear them say 'bind them.' Since you mention it, I begin to imagine perhaps I heard it. But does it matter? 'Bind them' means 'tie them up.'"

"The meaning is approximately the same, but the words are different. And if it is 'bind them,' I know what it is you must have heard if all the scraps you report are put together. Mr. Rubin knows, too — better than I do, I believe — though he may not quite realize it at the moment. I think it is his subrealization that has made him so resistant to the notion of Mr. Deryashkin having overheard an actual conspiracy."

Rubin sat up in his seat, blinking. "What do I know, Henry?"

Deryashkin said, "You have to explain 'murder.' Nothing counts if you do not explain 'murder.'"

Henry said, "I am not a linguist myself, Mr. Deryashkin, but I once heard it said that it is the vowels of a foreign language that are hardest to learn and that what is called a 'foreign accent' is mostly a mispronunciation of vowels. You might therefore not be able to distinguish a difference in vowels, and even withall the consonants unchanged, what you heard as 'murder' might really have been 'Mordor.'"

And at that Rubin threw up both hands and said, "Oh, my God."

"Exactly, sir," said Henry. "Early in the evening, I recall a discussion between yourself and Mr. Gonzalo concerning books that are popular with college students. One of them, surely, was *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien."

"Tolkien?" said Deryashkin, mystified, and stumbling over the word.

Henry said, "He was an English writer of fantasy who died very recently. I am quite sure that college students form Tolkien societies. That would account for the references to 'talking' that you mentioned, Mr. Deryashkin, as part of the conversation of the young men. They were not exhorting each other to keep quiet but were speaking of the Tolkien Society that I imagine one of them wished to join.

"In order to join, it might be that the candidate must first memorize the short poem that is

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the theme of the entire trilogy. If the young man were indeed reciting the poem, which twice mentions 'the Land of Mordor,' then I believe every scrap of conversation you heard could be accounted for. Mr. Rubin recommended the trilogy to me once, and I enjoyed it immensely. I cannot remember the poem word for word, but I suspect Mr. Rubin does."

"Do I!" said Rubin explosively. He rose to his feet, placed one hand on his chest, threw the other up to the ceiling and declaimed, grandiloquently:

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all,
One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

Henry nodded. "You see that it includes not only the word Mr. Deryashkin interpreted as 'murder' but also reference to the 'one ring,' to 'lying in the shadows,' to 'tying them up in the dark.'"

There was silence for a while.

Then Deryashkin said, "You are right. Now that I heard the poem, I must admit that this is what I heard this morning. Quite right. — But how could you know, waiter?"

Henry smiled. "I lack a sense of the dramatic, Mr. Deryashkin. You felt New York to be a jungle; so you heard jungle sounds. For myself, I prefer to suppose college students would sound like college students."

NOTE: Mr. Tolkien died on September 2, 1973. I was in Toronto at the time attending the 31st World Science Fiction Convention. Deeply moved at his death (for I enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings* and have read it three times), I decided to memorialize him in the only way I could — which was to write a Black Widowers tale that hinged upon him.

— *Isaac Asimov*

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A typically engrossing Poul Anderson story, but something of a change of pace in other ways, about the connection between one man's dreams and another's life.

The Visitor

by POUL ANDERSON

As we drove up between lawns, and trees, Ferrier warned me, "Don't be shocked at his appearance."

"You haven't told me anything about him," I answered. "Not to mention."

"For good reason," Ferrier said. "This can never be a properly controlled experiment, but we can at least try to keep down the wild variables." He drummed fingers on the steering wheel. "I'll say this much. He's an important man in his field, investment counseling and brokerage."

"Oh, you mean he's a partner in — Why, I've done some business with them myself. But I never met him."

"He doesn't see clientele. Or very many people ever. He works the research end. Mail, telephone, teletype, and reads a lot."

"Why aren't we meeting in his office?"

"I'm not ready to explain that." Ferrier parked the car and we left it.

The hospital stood well out of town. It was a tall clean block of glass and metal which somehow fitted the Ohio countryside rolling away on every side, green, green, and green, here and there a white-sided house, red-sided barn, blue-blooming flax field, motley of cattle, to break the corn and woodlots, fence lines and toning telephone wires. A warm wind soughed through birches and flickered their leaves; it bore scents of a rosebed where bees querned.

Leading me up the stairs to the main entrance, Ferrier said, "Why, there he is." A man in a worn and outdated brown suit waited for us at the top of the flight.

No doubt I failed to hide my reaction, but no doubt he was used to it, for his handclasp was ordinary. I couldn't read his face.

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Surgeons must have expended a great deal of time and skill, but they could only tame the gashes and fill in the holes, not restore an absolute ruin. That scar tissue would never move in human fashion. His hair did, a thin flutter of gray in the breeze; and so did his eyes, which were blue behind glasses. I thought they looked trapped, those eyes, but it could be only a fancy of mine.

When Ferrier had introduced me, the scarred man said, "I've arranged for a room where we can talk." He saw a bit of surprise on me and his tone flattened. "I'm pretty well-known here." His glance went to Ferrier. "You haven't told me what this is all about, Carl. But —" his voice dropped — "considering the place —"

The tension in my friend had hardened to sternness. "Please, let me handle this my way," he said.

When we entered, the receptionist smiled at our guide. The interior was cool, dim, carbolic. Down a hall I glimpsed somebody carrying flowers. We took an elevator to the uppermost floor.

There were the offices, one of which we borrowed. Ferrier sat down behind the desk, the scarred man and I took chairs confronting him. Though steel filing cabinets enclosed us, a window at Ferrier's back stood open for summer to blow in. From this level I overlooked the old highway, nowdays a mere picturesque side road. Occasional cars flung sunlight at me.

Ferrier became busy with pipe and tobacco. I shifted about. The scarred man waited. He had surely had experience in waiting.

"Well," Ferrier began. "I apologize to both you gentlemen. This mysteriousness. I hope that when you have the facts, you'll agree it was necessary. You see, I don't want to predispose your judgments or ... or imaginations. We're dealing with an extraordinarily subtle matter."

He forced a chuckle. "Or maybe with nothing. I give no promises, not even to myself. Parapsychological phenomena at best are —" he paused to search — "fugitive."

"I know you've made a hobby of them," the scarred man said. "I don't know much more."

Ferrier scowled. He got his pipe going before he replied: "I wouldn't call it a hobby. Can serious research only be done for an organization? I'm convinced there's a, well, a reality involved. But solid data are damnably hard to come by." He nodded at me. "If my friend here hadn't happened to be in on one of my projects, his whole experience might as well never have been. It'd have seemed

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like just another dream."

A strangeness walked along my spine. "Probably that's all it was," I said low. "Is."

The not-face turned toward me, the eyes inquired; then suddenly hands gripped tight the arms of the chair, as they do when the doctor warns he must give pain. I didn't know why. It made my voice awkward:

"I don't claim sensitivity, I can't read minds or guess Rhine cards, nothing of that sort works for me. Still, I do often have pretty detailed and, uh, coherent dreams. Carl's talked me into describing them on a tape recorder, first thing when I wake up, before I forget them. He's trying to check on Dunne's theory that dreams can foretell the future." Now I must attempt a joke. "No such luck, so far, or I'd be rich. However, when he learned about one I had a few nights ago —"

The scarred man shuddered. "And you happened to know *me*, Carl," broke from him.

The lines deepened around Ferrier's mouth. "Go on," he directed me, "tell your story, quick," and cannonaded smoke.

I sought from them both to the serenity beyond these walls, and I also spoke fast:

"Well, you see, I'd been alone at home for several days. My wife had taken our kid on a visit to her mother. I won't deny, Carl's hooked me on this ESP. I'm not a true believer, but I agree with him the evidence justifies looking further, and into curious places, too. So I was in bed, reading myself sleepy with ... Berdyaev, to be exact, because I'd been reading Lenau earlier, and he's wild, sad, crazy, you may know he died insane; nothing to go to sleep on. Did he linger anyhow, at the bottom of my mind?"

I was in a formlessness which writhed. Nor had it color, or heat or cold. Through it went a steady sound, whether a whine or drone I cannot be sure. Unreasonably sorrowful, I walked, though there was nothing under my feet, no forward or backward, no purpose in travel except that I could not weep.

The monsters did when they came. Their eyes melted and ran down the blobby heads in slow tears, while matter bubbled from within to renew that stare. They flopped as they floated, having no bones. They wavered around me and their lips made gibbering motions.

I was not afraid of attack, but a horror dragged through me of being forever followed by them and their misery. For now I knew that the nature of hell lies in that it goes on. I slogged, and they circled and

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rippled and sobbed, while the single noise was that which dwelt in the nothing, and time was not because none of this could change.

Time was reborn in a voice and a splash of light. Both were small. She was barely six years old, I guessed, my daughter's age. Brown hair in pigtails tied by red bows, and a staunch way of walking, also reminded me of Alice. She was more slender (elven, I thought) and more neat than my child — starched white flowerbud-patterned dress, white socks, shiny shoes, no trace of dirt on knees or tip-tilted face. But the giant teddy bear she held, arms straining around it, was comfortably shabby.

I thought I saw ghosts of road and tree behind her, but could not be certain. The mourning was still upon me.

She stopped. Her own eyes widened and widened. They were the color of earliest dusk. The monsters roiled. Then: "Mister!" she cried. The tone was thin but sweet. It cut straight across the hum of emptiness. "Oh, Mister!"

The tumorous beings mouthed at her. They did not wish to leave me, who carried some their woe. She dropped the bear and pointed. "Go 'way!, I want!" She stamped her foot, but silence responded, and I felt the defiance of the monsters. "All right," she said grimly. "Edward, you make them go."

The bear got up on his hind legs and stumped toward me. He was only a teddy, the fur on him worn off in patches by much hugging, a rip in his stomach carefully mended. I never imagined he was alive the way the girl and I were; she just sent him. Nevertheless he had taken a great hammer, which he swung in a fingerless paw, and become the hero who rescues people.

The monsters flapped stickily about. They didn't dare make a stand. As the bear drew close, they trailed off sullenly crying. The sound left us too. We stood in an honest hush and a fog full of sun-glow.

"Mister, Mister, Mister!" The girl came running, her arms out wide. I hunkered down to catch her. She struck me in a tumult, and joy exploded. We embraced till I lifted her on high, made to drop her, caught her again, over and over, while her laughter chimed.

Finally, breathless, I let her down. She gathered the bear under an elbow, which caused his feet to drag. Her free hand clung to mine. "I'm so glad you're here," she said. "Thank you, thank you. Can you stay?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Are you all by yourself?"

"Yes. 'Cept for Edward and —" Her words died out. At the time I supposed she had the monsters in

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mind and didn't care to speak of them.

"What's your name, dear?"

"Judy."

"You know, I have a little girl at home, a lot like you. Her name's Alice."

Judy stood mute for a while and a while. At last she whispered, "Could she come play?"

My throat wouldn't let me answer.

Yet Judy was not too dashed. "Well," she said, "I didn't 'spect you, and you came." Happiness rekindled in her and caught in me. Could my presence be so overwhelmingly enough? Now I felt at peace, as though every one of the rat-fears which ride in each of us had fled me. "Come on to my house," she added, a shy invitation, a royal command.

We walked. Edward bumped along after us. The mist vanished, and we were on a lane between low hedges. Elsewhere reached hills, their green a palette for the emerald or silver of coppices. Cows grazed, horses galloped, across miles. Closer, birds flitted and sparkled, a robin redbreast, a chickadee, a mockingbird who poured brook trills from a branch, a hummingbird bejeweled among bumblebees in a surge of honeysuckle. The air was vivid with odors, growth, fragrance, the friendly smell of the beasts. Overhead lifted an enormous blue where clouds wandered.

This wasn't my country. The colors were too intense, crayon-brilliant, and a person could drown in the scents. Birds, bees, butterflies, dragonflies somehow seemed gigantic, while cattle and horses were somehow unreachably far off, forever cropping or galloping. The clouds made real castles and sailing ships. Yet there was rightness as well as brightness. I felt — maybe not at home, but very welcome.

Oh, infinitely welcome.

Judy chattered, no, caroled. "I'll show you my garden an' my books an', an' the whole house. Even where Hoo Boy lives. Would you push me in my swing? I only can pump myself. I pretend Edward is pushing me, an' he says, 'High, high, up in the sky, Judy fly, I wonder why' like Daddy would, but it's only pretend, like when I play with my dolls or my Noah's ark animals an' make them talk. Would you play with me?" Wistfulness crossed her. "I'm not so good at making up ad adventures for them. Can you?" She turned merry again and skipped a few steps. "We'll have dinner in the living room if you make a fire. I'm not s'posed to make fire, I remember Daddy said, 'cept I can use the stove. I'll cook us dinner. Do you like tea? We have lots of different kinds. You look,

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an' tell me what kind you want. I'll make biscuits an' we'll put butter an' maple syrup on them like Grandmother does. An' we'll sit in front of the fire an' tell stories, okay?" And on and on.

The lane was now a street, shaded by big old elms; but it was empty save for the dappling of the sunlight, and the houses had a flatness about them, as if nothing lay behind their fronts. Wind mumbled in leaves. We reached a gate in a picket fence, which creaked when Judy opened it.

The lawn beyond was quite real, aside from improbably tall hollyhocks and bright roses and pansies along the edges. So was this single house. I saw where paint had peeled and curtains faded, the least bit, as will happen to any building. (Its neighbors stood flawless.) A leftover from the turn of the century, it rambled in scale-shaped shingles, bays, turrets, and gingerbread. The porch was a cool cavern that resounded beneath our feet. A brass knocker bore the grinning face of a gnome.

Judy pointed to it. "I call him Billy Bungalow because he goes bung when he comes down low," she said. "Do you want to use him? Daddy always did, and made him go a lot louder than I can. Please. He's waited such a long time." I have too, she didn't add.

I rattled the metal satisfactorily. She clapped her hands in glee. My ears were more aware of stillness behind the little noise. "Do you really live alone, brighteyes?" I asked.

"Sort of," she answered, abruptly going solemn.

"Not even a pet?"

"We had a cat, we called her Elizabeth, but she died an'... we was going to get another."

I lifted my brows. "We?"

"Daddy an' Mother an' me. C'mon inside!" She hastened to twist the doorknob.

We found an entry where a Tiffany window threw rainbows onto hardwood flooring. Hatrack and umbrella stand flanked a coat closet, opposite a grandfather clock which broke into triumphant booms on our arrival: for the hour instantly was six o'clock of a summer's evening. Ahead of us swept a staircase; right and left, doorways gave on a parlor converted to a sewing room, and on a living room where I glimpsed a fine stone fireplace. Corridors went high-ceilinged beyond them.

"Such a big house for one small girl," I said. "Didn't you mention, uh, Hoo Boy?"

Both arms hugged Edward close to her. I could barely hear: "He's 'maginary. They all are."

It never occurred to me to inquire further. It doesn't in dreams.

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"But *you're* here, Mister!" Judy cried, and the house was no longer hollow.

She clattered down the hall ahead of me, up the stairs, through chamber after chamber, basement, attic, a tiny space she had found beneath the witch-hat roof of a turret and assigned to Hoo Boy; she must show me everything. The place was bright and cheerful, didn't even echo much as we went around. The furniture was meant for comfort. Down in the basement stood shelves of jelly her mother had put up, and a workshop for her father. She showed me a half-finished toy sailboat he had been making for her. Her personal room bulged with the usual possessions of a child, including books I remembered well from years agone. (The library had a large collection too, but shadowy, a part of that home which I cannot catalogue.) Good pictures hung on the walls. She had taken the liberty of pinning clippings almost everywhere, cut from the stacks of magazines which a household will accumulate. They mostly showed animals or children.

In the living room I noticed a cabinet-model radio-phonograph though no television set. "Do you ever use that?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, nothing comes out of it any more. I sing for myself a lot." She put Edward on the sofa. "You stay an' be the lord of the manor," she ordered him. "I will be the lady making dinner, an' Mister will be the faithful knight bringing firewood.." She went timid. "Will you, please, Mister?"

"Sounds great to me," I smiled, and saw her wriggle for delight.

"Quick!" She grabbed me anew and we ran back to the kitchen. Our footfalls applauded.

The larder was well-stocked. Judy showed me her teas and asked my preference. I confessed I hadn't heard of several kinds; evidently her parents were connoisseurs. "So'm I," Judy said after I explained that word. "Then I'll pick. An' you tell me, me an' Edward, a story while we eat, okay?"

"Fair enough," I agreed.

She opened a door. Steps led down to the back yard. Unlike the closely trimmed front, this was a wilderness of assorted toys, her swing, and fever-gaudy flowers. I had to laugh. "You do your own gardening, do you?"

She nodded. "I'm not very expert. But Mother promised I could have a garden here." She pointed to a shed at the far end of the grounds. "The firewood's in that. I got to get busy." However firm her tone, the fingers trembled which squeezed mine. "I'm so happy," she whispered.

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I closed the door behind me and picked a route among her blossoms. Windows stood wide to a mild air full of sunset, and I heard her start singing.

"The little red pony ran over the hill

And galloped and galloped away —"

The horses in those meadows came back to me, and suddenly I stood alone, somewhere, while one of them who was my Alice fled from me for always; and I could not call out to her.

After a time, walking became possible again. But I wouldn't enter the shed at once; I hadn't the guts, when Judy's song had ended, leaving me here by myself. Instead, I brushed on past it for a look at whatever might lie behind for my comfort.

That was the same countryside as before, but long-shadowed under the falling sun and most quiet. A blackbird sat on a blackberry tangle, watched me and made pecking motions. From the yard, straight southward through the land, ran a yellow brick road.

I stepped onto it and took a few strides. In this light the pavement was the hue of molten gold, strong under my feet; here was the kind of highway which draws you ahead one more mile to see what's over the next hill, so you may forget the pony that galloped. After all, don't yellow brick roads lead to Oz?

"Mister!" screamed at my back. "No, stop, stop!"

I turned around. Judy stood at the border. She shuddered inside the pretty dress as she reached toward me. Her face was stretched quite out of shape. "Not yonder, Mister!"

Of course I made haste. When we were safely in the yard, I held her close while the dread went out of her in a burst of tears. Stroking her hair and murmuring, at last I dared ask, "But where does it go?"

She jammed her head into the curve of my shoulder and gripped me. "T-t-to Grandmother's."

"Why, is that bad? You're making us biscuits like hers, remember?"

"We can't *ever* go there," Judy gasped. Her hands on my neck were cold.

"Well, now, well, now." Disengaging, while still squatted to be at her height, I clasped her shoulder and chucked her chin and assured her the world was fine; look what a lovely evening, and we'd soon dine with Edward, but first I'd better build our fire, so could she help me bring in the wood? Secretly through me went another song I know, Swedish, the meaning of it:

"Children are a mysterious folk, and they live in a wholly strange world —"

Before long she was glad once

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more. As we left, I cast a final glance down the highway, and then caught a breath of what she felt: less horror than unending loss and grief, somewhere on that horizon. It made me be extra jocular while we took armloads of fuel to the living room.

Thereafter Judy trotted between me and the kitchen, attending to her duties. She left predictable chaos, heaped dishes, scorched pan, strewn flour, smeared butter and syrup and Lord knowns what else. I forbore to raise the subject of cleanup. No doubt we'd tackle that tomorrow. I didn't mind.

Later we sat cross-legged under the sofa where Edward presided, ate our biscuits and drank our tea with plenty of milk, and laughed a great deal. Judy had humor. She told me of a Fourth of July celebration she had been at, where there were so many people that "I bet just their toes weighed a hundred pounds." That led to a picnic which had been rained out, and — she must have listened to adult talk — she insisted that in any properly regulated universe, Samuel Gompers would have invented rubber boots. The flames whirled red, yellow, blue, and talked back to the ticking, booming clock; shadows played tag across walls; outside stood a night of gigantic stars.

"Tell me another story," she demanded and snuggled into my lap, the calculating minx. Borrowing from what I had done for Alice, I spun a long yarn about a girl named Judy, who lived in the forest with her friends Edward T. Bear and Billy Bungalow and Hoo Boy, until they built a candy-striped balloon and departed on all sorts of explorations; and her twilight-colored eyes got wider and wider.

They drooped at last, though. "I think we'd better turn in," I suggested. "We can carry on in the morning."

She nodded. "Yesterday they said today was tomorrow," she observed, "BUT TODAY THEY KNOW BETTER."

I expected that after those fireside hours the electrics would be harsh to us, but they weren't. We went upstairs, Judy on my right shoulder, Edward on my left. She guided me to a guest room, pattered off, and brought back a set of pajamas. "Daddy wouldn't mind," she said.

'Would you like me to tuck you in?" I asked.

"Oh —" For a moment she radiated. Then the seriousness came upon her. She put finger to chin, frowning, before she shook her head. "No, thanks. I don't think you're s'posed for that."

"All right." My privilege is to see Alice to her bed, but each

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family has its own tradition. Judy must have sensed my disappointment, because she touched me and smiled at me, and when I stooped she caught me and breathed,

"You're really real, Mister. I love you,"

and ran down the hall.

My room resembled the others, well and unpretentiously furnished. The wallpaper showed willows and lakes and Chinese castles which I had seen in the clouds. Gauzy white curtains, aflutter in easy airs, veiled away those lantern-big stars. Above the bed Judy had pinned a picture of a galloping pony.

I thought of a trip to the bathroom, but felt no need. Besides, I might disturb my hostess; I had no doubt she brushed her teeth, being such a generally dutiful person. Did she say prayers too? In spite of Alice, I don't really understand little girls, any more than I understand how a mortal could write *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring*. Boys are different; it's true about the slugs and snails and puppy dogs' tails. I've been there and I know.

I got into the pajamas, lay down in the bed and the breeze, turned off the light, and was quickly asleep.

Sometimes we remember a night's sleep. I spent this one being happy about tomorrow.

Maybe that was why I woke early, in a clear, shadowless gray, cool as the air. The curtains rippled and blew, but there was no sound whatsoever.

Or ... a rustle? I lay half awake, eyes half open and peace behind them. Someone moved about. She was very tall, I knew, and she was tidying the house. I did not try, then, to look upon her. In my drowsiness, she might as well have been the wind.

After she had finished in this chamber, I came fully to myself, and saw how bureau and chair and the bulge of blankets that my feet made were strangers in the dusk which runs before the sun. I swung legs across bedside, felt hardwood under my soles. My lungs drank odors of grass. Oh, Judy will snooze for hours yet, I thought, but I'll go peek in at her before I pop downstairs and start a surprise breakfast.

When dressed, I followed the hallway to her room. Its door wasn't shut. Beyond, I spied a window full of daybreak.

I stopped. A woman was singing.

She didn't use real words. You often don't, over a small bed. She sang well-worn nonsense,

"Cloddledy loldy boldy boo,
Cloddledy lol-dy bol-dy boo-oo,"

to the tenderest melody I have ever heard. I think that tune was what

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drew me on helpless, till I stood in the entrance.

And she stood above Judy. I couldn't truly see her: a blue shadow, maybe? Judy was as clear to me as she is this minute, curled in a prim nightgown, one arm under her cheek (how long the lashes and stray brown hair), the other around Edward, while on a shelf overhead, Noah's animals kept watch.

The presence grew aware of me.

She turned and straightened, taller than heaven. Why have you looked? she asked me in boundless gentleness. Now you must go, and never come back.

No, I begged. Please.

When even I may do more than this, she sighed, you cannot stay or ever return, who looked beyond the Edge.

I covered my eyes.

I'm sorry, she said, and I believe she touched my head as she passed from us.

Judy awakened. "Mister —" She lifted her arms, wanting me to come and be hugged, but I didn't dare.

"I have to leave, sweetheart," I told her.

She bolted to her feet. "No, no, no," she said, not loud at all.

"I wish I could stay awhile," I answered. "Can you guess how much I wish it?"

Then she knew. "You ... were awful kind ... to come see me," she got out.

She went to me with the same resolute gait as when first we met, and took my hand, and we walked downstairs together and forth into the morning.

"Will you say hello to your daughter from me?" she requested once.

"Sure," I said. Hell, yes. Only how?

We went along the flat and empty street, toward the sun. Where a blackbird perched on an elm bough, and the leaves made darkness beneath, she halted. "Good-by, you good Mister," she said.

She would have kissed me had I had the courage. "Will you remember me, Judy?"

"I'll play with my remembering of you. Always." She snapped after air; but her head was held bravely. "Thanks again. I do love you."

So she let me go, and I left her. A single time I turned around to wave. She waved back, where she stood under the sky all by herself.

The scarred man was crying. He wasn't skilled in it; he barked and hiccoughed.

Surgically, Ferrier addressed him. "The description of the house corresponds to your former home. Am I correct?"

The hideous head jerked a nod.

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"And you're entirely unfamiliar with the place," Ferrier declared to me. "It's in a different town from yours."

"Right," I said. "I'd no reason before today to suppose I'd had anything more than a dream." Anger flickered. "Well, Goddamn your scientific caution, now I want some explanations."

"I can't give you those," Ferrier admitted. "Not when I've no idea how the phenomenon works. You're welcome to what few facts I have."

The scarred man toiled toward a measure of calm. "I, I, I apologize for the scene," he stuttered. "A blow, you realize. Or a hope?" His gaze ransacked me.

"Do you think we should go see her?" Ferrier suggested.

For reply, the scarred man led us out. We were silent in corridor and elevator. When we emerged on the third floor, the hospital smell struck hard. He regained more control over himself as we passed among rubber-tired nurses and views of occupied beds. But his gesture was rickety that, at last, beckoned us through a certain doorway.

Beyond lay several patients and a near-total hush. Abruptly I understood why he, important in the world, went ill-clad. Hospitals don't come cheap.

His voice grated: "Telepathy, or what? The brain isn't gone; not a flat EEG. Could you —" That went as far as he was able.

"No," I said, while my fingers struggled with each other. "It must have been a fluke. And since, I'm forbidden.

We had stopped at a cluster of machinery. "Tell him what happened," Ferrier said without any tone whatsoever.

The scarred man looked past us. His words came steady, if a bit shrill. "We were on a trip, my wife and daughter and me. First we meant to visit my mother-in-law in Kentucky."

"You were southbound, then." I foreknew. "On a yellow brick road." They still have that kind, here and there in our part of the country.

"A drunk driver hit our car," he said. "My wife was killed. I became what you see. Judy —" He chopped a hand toward the long white form beneath us. "That was nineteen years ago," he ended.

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Pohl & Kornbluth's "The Meeting" (November 1972) won last year's Hugo award for best short story. This unusual new story came from Fred Pohl with the following note("I've been wanting for years to write a story about a science-fiction writer who couldn't be a science-fiction writer because he happened to be born in a time when that art was not possible, and the other day I realized that that story could fit nicely into the framework of an incomplete fragment of Cyril's ..."

Mute Inglorious Tam

by FREDERIK POHL and C. M. KORNBLUTH

On a late Saturday afternoon in summer, just before the ringing of Angelus, Tam of the Wealdway straightened from the furrows in his plowed strip of Oldfield and stretched his cracking joints.

He was a small and dark man, of almost pure Saxon blood. Properly speaking, his name was only Tam. There was no need for further identification. He would never go a mile from a neighbor who had known him from birth. But sometimes he called himself by a surname — it was one of many small conceits that complicated his proper and straightforward life — and he would be soundly whipped for it if his Norman masters ever caught him at it.

He had been breaking clods in the field for fifteen hours, interrupted only by the ringing of the canonical hours from the squat, tiny church, and a mouthful of bread and soft cheese at noon. It was not easy for him to stand straight. It was also not particularly wise. A man could lose his strip for poor tilth, and Tam had come close enough, often enough. But there were times when the thoughts that chased themselves around his head made him forget the steady chop of the wooden hoe, and he would stand entranced, staring toward Lymeford Castle, or the river, or toward nothing at all, while he invented fanciful encounters and impossible prosperings. It was another of Tam's conceits, and a most dangerous one, if it were known. The least it might get him was a cuff from a man-at-arms. The most was a particularly unpleasing death.

Since Salisbury, in Sussex, was flat ground, its great houses were not perched dramatically on crags, like the keeps of robber barons along the Rhine or the grim

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fortresses of the Scottish lairds. They were the least they could be to do the job they had to do, in an age which had not yet imagined the palace or the cathedral.

In the year 1303 Lymeford Castle was a dingy pile of stone. It housed Sir and Lady Robert Bowen (sometimes they spelled it Bohun, or Beauhun, or Beauhaunt) and their household servants and men-at-arms in very great discomfort. It did not seem so to them particularly. They had before them the housing of their Saxon subjects to show what misery could be. The castle was intended to guard a bridge across the Lyme River: a key point on the high road from Portsmouth to London. It did this most effectively. William of Normandy, who had taken England by storm a couple of centuries earlier, did not mean for himself or his descendants to be taken in the same way on another day. So Lymeford Castle had been awarded to Sir Robert's great-great-great-grandfather on the condition that he defend it and thereby defend London as well against invasion on that particular route from the sea.

That first Bowen had owned more than stones. A castle must be fed. The castellan and his lady, their household servants and their armed men could not be expected to till the field and milk the cows. The founder of Sir Robert's line had solved the problem of feeding the castle by rounding up a hundred of the defeated Saxon soldiers, clamping iron rings around their necks and setting them to work at the great task of clearing the untidy woods which surrounded the castle. After cleaning and plowing from sunup to sunset the slaves were free to gather twigs and mud, with which they made themselves kennels to sleep in. And in that first year, to celebrate the harvest and to insure a continuing supply of slaves, the castellan led his men-at-arms on a raid into Salisbury town itself. They drove back to Lymeford, with whips, about a hundred Saxon girls and women. After taking their pick, they gave the rest to the slaves, and the chaplain read a single perfunctory marriage service over the filthy, ring-necked slaves and the weeping Salisbury women. Since the male slaves happened to be from Northumbria, while the women were Sussex bred, they could not understand each other's dialects. It did not matter. The huts were enlarged, and next midsummer there was another crop, this time of babies.

The passage of two centuries had changed things remarkably little. A Bowen (or Beauhaunt) still guarded the Portsmouth-London high road. He still took pride in his Norman blood. Saxons still tilled

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the soil for him and if they no longer had the iron collar, or the name of slaves, they still would dangle from the gallows in the castle courtyard for any of a very large number of possible offenses against his authority. At Runnymede, many years before, King John had signed the Great Charter conferring some sort of rule of law to protect his barons against arbitrary acts, but no one had thought of extending those rights to the serfs. They could die for almost anything or for nothing at all: for trying to quit their master's soil for greener fields; for failing to deliver to the castle their bushels of grain, as well as their choicest lambs, calves and girl-children; for daring in any way to flout the divine law that made one kind of man ruler and another kind ruled. It was this offense to which Tam was prone, and one day, as his father had told him the day before he died, it would cost him the price that no man can afford to pay, though all do.

Though Tam had never even heard of the Magna Carta, he sometimes thought that a world might sometime come to be in which a man like himself might own the things he owned as a matter of right and not because a man with a sword had not decided to take them from him. Take Alys his wife. He did not mind in any real sense that the men-at-arms had bedded her before he had. She was none the worse for it in any way that Tam could measure; but he had slept badly that night, pondering why it was that no one needed to consult him about the woman the priest had sworn to him that day, and whether it might not be more — more — he grappled for a word ("fair" did not occur to him) and caught at "right" — more right that he should say whose pleasures his property served.

Mostly he thought of sweeter and more fanciful things. When the falconers were by, he sometimes stole a look at the hawk stooping on a pigeon and thought that a man might fly if only he had the wings and the wit to move them. Pressed into driving the castellan's crops into the granary, he swore at the dumb oxen and imagined a cart that could turn its wheels by itself. If the Lyme in flood could carry a tree bigger than a house faster than a man could run, why could that power not pull a plow? Why did a man have to plant five kernels of corn to see one come up? Why could not all five come up and make him five times as fat?

He even looked at the village that was his home, and wondered why it had to be so poor, so filthy and so small; and that thought had hardly occurred even to Sir Robert himself.

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In the year 1303 Lymeford looked like this:

The Lyme River, crossed by the new stone structure that was the fourth Lymeford Bridge, ran south to the English Channel. Its west bank was overgrown with the old English oak forest. Its right bank was the edge of the great clearing. Lymeford Castle, hard by the bridge, covered the road that curved northeast to London. For the length of the clearing, the road was not only the king's high-way, it was also the Lymeford village street. At a discreet distance from the castle it began to be edged with huts, larger or smaller as their tenants were rich or fecund. The road widened a bit halfway to the edge of the clearing, and there on its right side sat the village church.

The church was made of stone, but that was about all you could say for it. All the wealth it owned it had to draw from the village, and there was not much wealth there to draw. Still, silver pennies had to be sent regularly to the bishop, who in turn would send them on to Rome. The parish priest of Lymeford was an Italian who had never seen the bishop, to whom it had never occurred to try to speak the language and who had been awarded the living of Lymeford by a cardinal who was likewise Italian and likewise could not have described its location within fifty miles. There was nothing unusual in that, and the Italian collected the silver pennies while his largely Norman, but Saxon speaking, locum tenens scraped along on donations of beer, dried fish and the odd occasional calf. He was a dour man who would have been a dreadful one if he had had a field of action that was larger than Lymeford.

Across the street from the church was The Green, a cheerless trampled field where the compulsory archery practice and pike drill were undergone by every physically able male of Lymeford, each four weeks, except in the worst of winter and when plowing or harvest was larger in Sir Robert's mind than the defense of his castle. His serfs would fight when he told them to, and he would squander their lives with the joy a man feels in exercising the one extravagance he permits himself on occasion. But that was only at need, and the fields and the crops were forever. He saw to the crops with some considerable skill. A three-field system prevailed in Lymeford. There was Oldfield, east of the road, and the first land brought under cultivation by the slaves two hundred years ago. There was Newfield, straddling the road and marked off from Oldfield by a path into the woods called the Wealdway, running southeast from The Green into the oak forest at the

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edge of the clearing. There was Fallowfield, last to be cleared and planted, which for the most part lay south of the road and the castle. From the left side of the road to the river, The Mead spread its green acres. The Mead was held in common by all the villagers. Any man might turn his cows or sheep to graze on it anywhere. The farmed fields, however, were divided into long, narrow strips, each held by a villager who would defend it with his fists or his sickle against the encroachment of a single inch. In the year 1303 Oldfield and Newfield were under cultivation, and Fallowfield was being rested. Next year it would be Newfield and Fallowfield farmed, and Oldfield would rest.

While Angelus clanged on the cracked church bell, Tam stood with his head downcast. He was supposed to be praying. In a way he was, the impenetrable rote-learned Latin slipping through his brain like the reiteration of a mantra, but he was also pleasantly occupied in speculating how plump his daughter might become if they could farm all three fields each year without destroying the soil, and at the same time thinking of the pot of fennel-spiced beer that should be waiting in his hut.

As the Angelus ceased to ring, his neighbor's hail dispelled both dreams.

Irritated, Tam shouldered his wooden-bladed hoe and trudged along the Wealdway, worn deep by two hundred years of bare peasant feet.

His neighbor, Hud, fell in with him. In the bastard MidlandSussex hybrid that was the Lymeford dialect, Hud said, "Man, that was a long day."

"All the days are long in the summer."

"You were dreaming again, man. Saw you."

Tam did not reply. He was careful of Hud. Hud was as small and dark as himself, but thin and nervous rather than blocky. Tam knew he got that from his father Robin, who had got it from his mother Joan — who had got it from some man-at-arms on her wedding night spent in the castle. Hud was always asking, always talking, always seeking new things. But when Tam, years younger, had dared to try to open his untamable thoughts to him, Hud had run straight to the priest.

"Won't the players be coming by this time of year, man?" he pestered.

"They might."

"Ah, wouldn't it be a great thing if they came by tomorrow? And then after Mass they'd make their pitch in The Green, and out would come the King of England and Captain Slasher and the

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Turkish Champion in their clothes colored like the sunset, and St. George in his silver armor!"

Tam grunted. "'Tisn't silver. Couldn't be. If it was silver the robbers in the Weald would never let them get this far."

The nervous little man said, "I didn't mean it *was* silver. I meant it *looked* like silver."

Tam could feel anger welling up in him, drowning the good aftertaste of his reverie and the foretaste of his fennel beer. He said angrily, "You talk like a fool."

"Like a fool, is it? And who is always dreaming the sun away, man?"

"God's guts, leave off!" shouted Tam, and clamped his teeth on his words too late. He seldom swore. He could have bitten his tongue out after he uttered the words. Now there would be confession of blasphemy to make, and Father Bloughram, who had been looking lean and starved of late, would demand a penance in grain instead of any beggarly saying of prayers. Hud cowered back, staring. Tam snarled something at him, he could not himself have said what, and turned off the deep-trodden path into his own hut.

The hut was cramped and murky with wood smoke from its open hearth. There was a smoke hole in the roof that let some of it out. Tam leaned his hoe against the wattled wall, flopped down onto the bundle of rags in the corner that was the bed for all three of the members of his family and growled at Alys his wife: "Beer." His mind was full of Hud and anger, but slowly the rage cooled and the good thoughts crept back in: Why not a softer bed, a larger hut? Why not a fire that did not smoke, as his returning grandfather, who wore a scar from the Holy Land to his grave, had told him the Saracens had? And with the thought of a different kind of life came the thought of beer; he could taste the stuff now, sluicing the dust from his throat; the bitterness of the roasted barley, the sweetness of the fennel. "Beer," he called again, and became aware that his wife had been tiptoeing about the hut.

"Tam," she said apprehensively, "Joanie Brewer's got the flux."

His brows drew together like thunderclouds. "No beer?" he asked.

"She's got the flux, and not for all the barley in Oldfield could she brew beer. I tried to borrow from Hud's wife, and she had only enough for him, she showed me—"

Tam got up and knocked her spinning into a corner with one backhanded blow. "Was there no beer yesterday?" he shouted. "God forgive you for being the useless

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slut you are! May the Horned Man and all his brood fly away with a miserable wretch that won't brew beer for the husband that sweats his guts out from sunup to sunset!"

She got up cringing, and he knocked her into the corner again.

The next moment there was a solid crack across his back, and he crashed to the dirt floor. Another blow took him on the legs as he rolled over, and he looked up and saw the raging face of his daughter Kate and the wooden-bladed hoe upraised in her hands.

She did not strike him a third time, but stood there menacingly. "Will you leave her alone?" she demanded.

"Yes, you devil's get!" Tam shouted from the floor, and then, "You'd like me to say no, wouldn't you? And then you'd beat in the brains of the old fool that gave you a name and a home."

Weeping, Alys protested, "Don't say that, husband. She's your child, I'm a good woman, I have nothing black on my soul."

Tam got to his feet and brushed dirt from his leather breeches and shirt. "We'll say no more about it," he said. "But it's hard when a man can't have his beer."

"You wild boar," said Kate, not lowering the hoe. "If I hadn't come back from The Mead with the cow, you might have killed her."

"No, child," Tam said uneasily. He knew his temper. "Let's talk of other things." Contemptuously she put down the hoe, while Alys got up, sniffling, and began to stir the peaseporridge on the hearth. Suddenly the smoke and heat inside the hut was more than Tam could bear, and muttering something, he stumbled outside and breathed in the cool air of the night.

It was full dark now and, for a wonder, stars were out. Tam's Crusader grandfather had told him of the great bright nights in the mountains beyond Acre, with such stars that a man could spy friend's face from foe's at a bowshot. England had nothing like that, but Tam could make out the Plow, fading toward the sunset, and Cassiopeia pursuing it from the east. His grandfather had tried to teach him the Arabic names for some of the brighter stars, but the man had died when Tam was ten and the memories were gone. What were those two, now, so bright and so close together? Something about twin peacocks? Twins at least, thought Tam, staring at Gemini, but a thought of peacocks lingered. He wished he had paid closer attention to the old man, who had been a Saracen's slave for nine years until a lucky raid had captured his caravan and set him free.

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A distant sound of yelping caught his ear. Tam read the sound easily enough; a vixen and her half-grown young, by the shrillness. The birds came into the plowed fields at night to steal the seed, and the foxes came to catch the birds, and this night they had found something big enough to try to catch them — wolf, perhaps, Tam thought, though it was not like them to come so near to men's huts in good weather. There were a plenty of them in Sir Robert's forest, with fat deer and birds and fish beyond counting in the streams; but it was what a man's life was worth to take them. He stood there, musing on the curious chance that put venison on Sir Robert's table and peaseporridge on his, and on the lights in the sky, until he realized Alys had progressed from abject to angry and must by now be eating without him.

After the evening meal Alys scurried over to Hud's wife with her tale of beastly husbands, and Kate sat on a billet of wood, picking knots out of her hair.

Tam squatted on the rags and studied her. At fifteen years, or whatever she was, she was a wild one. How had it happened that the babe who cooed and grasped at the grass whistle her father made her had turned into this stranger? She was not biddable. Edwy's strip adjoined Tam's in Fallowfield, and Edwy had a marriageable son. What was more reasonable than that Kate should marry him? But she had talked about his looks. True, the boy was no beauty. What did that matter? When, as a father should, he had brushed that aside, she had threatened plainly to run away, bringing ruin and the rope on all of them. Nor would she let herself be beaten into good sense, but instead kicked — with painful accuracy — and bit and scratched like a fiend from hell's pit.

He felt a pang at that thought. Oh, Alys was an honest woman. But there were other ways the child of another could be fobbed off on you. A moment of carelessness when you didn't watch the cradle — it was too awful to think of, but sometimes you had to think of it. Everybody knew that Old People liked nothing better than to steal somebody's baby and slip one of their own into the cradle. He and Alys had duly left bowls of milk out during the child's infancy, and on feast days bowls of beer. They had always kept a bit of iron by Kate, because the Old People hated iron. But still....

Tam lighted a rushlight soaked in mutton fat at what was left of the fire. Alys would have something to say about his extravagance, but a mood for talking was on him, and

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he wanted to see Kate's face "Child," he said, "one Sunday now the players will come by and pitch on The Green. And we'll all go after Mass and see them play. Why, St. George looks as if he wears armor all of silver!"

She tugged at her hair and would not speak or look at him.

He squirmed uncomfortably on the ragged bed. "I'll tell you a story, child," he offered.

Contemptuously, "Tell your drunken friend. I've heard the two of you, Hud and yourself, lying away at each other with the beer working in you."

"Not that sort of story, Kate. A story no one has ever told."

No answer, but at least her face was turned toward him. Emboldened, he began:

"'Tis a story of a man who owned a great strong wain that could move without oxen, and in it he —"

"What pulled it, then? Goats?"

"Nothing pulled it, child. It moved by itself. It —" he fumbled, and found inspiration — "it was a gift from the Old People, and the man put on it meal and dried fish and casks of water, and he rode in it to one of those bright stars you see just over church. Many days he traveled, child. When he got there —"

"What road goes to a star, man?"

"No road, Kate. This wain rode in the air, like a cloud. And then —"

"Clouds can't carry casks of water," she announced. "You talk like Edwy's mad son that thinks he saw the Devil in a turnip."

"Listen now, Kate!" he snapped. "It is only a story. When

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the man came to —"

"Story! It's a great silly lie."

"Neither lie nor truth," he roared. "It is a story I am telling you."

"Stories should be sense," she said positively. "Leave off your dreaming, father. All Lymeford talks of it, man. Even in the castle they speak of mad Tam the dreamer."

"Mad, I am?" he shouted, reaching for the hoe. But she was too quick for him. She had it in her hands; he tried to take it from her, and they wrestled, rock against flame, until he heard his wife's caterwauling from the entrance, where she'd come running, called by the noise; and when he looked round, Kate had the hoe from him and space to use it and this time she got him firmly atop the skull — and he knew no more that night.

In the morning he was well enough, and Kate was wisely nowhere in sight. By the time the long day was through he had lost the anger.

Alys made sure there was beer that night, and the nights that followed. The dreams that came from the brew were not the same as the dreams he had tried so hard to put into words. For the rest of his life, sometimes he dreamed those dreams again, immense dreams, dreams that — had he had the words, and the skill, and above all the audience — a hundred generations might have remembered. But he didn't have any of those things. Only the beer.

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Philip Dick's 34th sf novel, FLOW MY TEARS, THE POLICEMAN SAID, was recently published by Doubleday. This story, written especially for this issue, is his first appearance here since "The Electric Ant," in our 20th anniversary issue.

The Pre-Persons

by PHILIP K. DICK

Past the grove of cypress trees Walter — he had been playing king of the mountain — saw the white truck, and he knew it for what it was. He thought, That's the abortion truck. Come to take some kid in for a postpartum down at the abortion place.

And he thought, Maybe my folks called it. For me.

He ran and hid among the blackberries, feeling the scratching of the thorns but thinking, It's better than having the air sucked out of your lungs. That's how they do it; they perform all the P.P.s on all the kids there at the same time. They have a big room for it. For the kids nobody wants.

Burrowing deeper into the blackberries, he listened to hear if the truck stopped; he heard its motor.

"I am invisible," he said to himself, a line he had learned at the fifth-grade play of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a line Oberon, whom he had played, he said. And after that no one could see him. Maybe that was true now. Maybe the magic saying worked in real life; so he said it again to himself, "I am invisible." But he knew he was not. He could still see his arms and legs and shoes, and he knew they — everyone, the abortion truck man especially, and his mom and dad — they could see him too. If they looked.

If it was him they were after this time.

He wished he was a king; he wished he had magic dust all over him and a shining crown that glistened, and ruled fairyland and had the Puck to confide to. To ask for advice from, even. Advice even if he himself was a king and bickered with Titania, his wife.

I guess, he thought, saying something doesn't make it true.

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Sun burned down on him and he squinted, but mostly he listened to the abortion truck motor; it kept making its sound, and his heart gathered hope as the sound went on and on. Some other kid, turned over to the abortion clinic, not him; someone up the road.

He made his difficult exit from the berry brambles shaking and in many places scratched and moved step by step in the direction of his house. And as he trudged he began to cry, mostly from the pain of the scratches but also from fear and relief.

"Oh, good lord," his mother exclaimed, on seeing him. "What in the name of God have you been doing?"

He said, stammeringly, "I — saw — the abortion — truck."

"And you thought it was for you?"

Mutely, he nodded.

"Listen, Walter," Cynthia Best said, kneeling down and taking hold of his trembling hands, "I promise, your dad and I both promise, you'll never be sent to the County Facility. Anyhow you're too old. They only take children up to twelve."

"But Jeff Vogel—"

"His parents got him in just before the new law went into effect. They couldn't take him now, legally. They couldn't take you now. Look — you have a soul; the law says a twelve-year-old boy has a soul. So he can't go to the County Facility. See? You're safe. Whenever you see the abortion truck, it's for someone else, not you. Never for you. Is that clear? It's come for another younger child who doesn't have a soul yet, a pre-person."

Staring down, not meeting his mother's gaze, he said, "I don't feel like I got a soul; I feel like I always did."

"It's a legal matter," his mother said briskly. "Strictly according to age. And you're past the age. The Church of Watchers got Congress to pass the law — actually they, those church people, wanted a lower age; they claimed the soul entered the body at three years old, but a compromise bill was put through. The important thing for you is that you are legally safe, however you feel inside; do you see?"

"Okay," he said, nodding.

"You knew that."

He burst out with anger and grief, "What do you think it's like, maybe waiting every day for someone to come and put you in a wire cage in a truck and —"

"Your fear is irrational," his mother said.

"I saw them take Jeff Vogel that day. He was crying, and the man just opened the back of the truck and put him in and shut the back of the truck."

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"That was two years ago. You're weak." His mother glared at him. "Your grandfather would whip you if he saw you now and heard you talk this way. Not your father. He'd just grin and say something stupid. Two years later, and intellectually you know you're past the legal maximum age! How—" She struggled for the word. "You are being *depraved.*"

"And he never came back."

"Perhaps someone who wanted a child went inside the County Facility and found him and adopted him. Maybe he's got a better set of parents who really care for him. They keep them thirty days before they destroy them." She corrected herself. "Put them to sleep, I mean."

He was not reassured. Because he knew "put him to sleep" or "put them to sleep" was a Mafia term. He drew away from his mother, no longer wanting her comfort. She had blown it, as far as he was concerned; she had shown something about herself or, anyhow, the source of what she believed and thought and perhaps did. What all of them did. I know I'm no different, he thought, than two years ago when I was just a little kid; if I have a soul now like the law says, then I had a soul then, or else we have no souls — the only real thing is just a horrible metallic-painted truck with wire over its windows carrying off kids their parents no longer want, parents using an extension of the old abortion law that let them kill an unwanted child before it came out: because it had no "soul" or "identity," it could be sucked out by a vacuum system in less than two minutes. A doctor could do a hundred a day, and it was legal because the unborn child wasn't "human." He was a pre-person. Just like this truck now; they merely set the date forward as to when the soul entered.

Congress had inaugurated a simple test to determine the approximate age at which the soul entered the body: the ability to formulate higher math like algebra. Up to then, it was only body, animal instincts and body, animal reflexes and responses to stimuli. Like Pavlov's dogs when they saw a little water seep in under the door of the Leningrad laboratory; they "knew" but were not human.

I guess I'm human, Walter thought, and looked up into the gray, severe face of his mother, with her hard eyes and rational grimness. I guess I'm like you, he thought. Hey, it's neat to be a human, he thought; then you don't have to be afraid of the truck coming.

"You feel better," his mother observed. "I've lowered your threshold of anxiety."

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"I'm not so freaked," Walter said. It was over; the truck had gone and not taken him.

But it would be back in a few days. It cruised perpetually.

Anyhow he had a few days. And then the sight of it — if only I didn't know they suck the air out of the lungs of the kids they have there, he thought. Destroy them that way. Why? Cheaper, his dad had said. Saves the taxpayers money.

He thought then about taxpayers and what they would look like. Something that scowled at all children, he thought. That did not answer if the child asked them a question. A thin face, lined with watch-worry grooves, eyes always moving. Or maybe fat; one or the other. It was the thin one that scared him; it didn't enjoy life nor want life to be. It flashed the message, "Die, go away, sicken, don't exist." And the abortion truck was the proof — or the instrument — of it.

"Mom," he said, "how do you shut a County Facility? You know, the abortion clinic where they take the babies and little kids."

"You go and petition the county legislature," his mother said.

"You know what I'd do?" he said. "I'd wait until there were no kids in there, only county employees, and I'd firebomb it."

"Don't talk like that!" his mother said severely, and he saw on her face the stiff lines of the thin taxpayer. And it frightened him; his own mother frightened him. The cold and opaque eyes mirror nothing, no soul inside, and he thought, *It's you who don't have a soul,* you and your skinny messages not-to-be. Not us.

And then he ran outside to play again.

A bunch more kids had seen the truck; he and they stood around together, talking now and then, but mostly kicking at rocks and dirt, and occasionally stepping on a bad bug.

"Who'd the truck come for?" Walter said.

"Fleischhacker. Earl Fleischhacker."

"Did they get him?"

"Sure, didn't you hear the yelling?"

"Was his folks home at the time?"

"Naw, they split earlier on some shuck about 'taking the car in to be greased.'"

"*They* called the truck?" Walter said.

"Sure, it's the law; it's gotta be the parents. But they were too chickenshit to be there when the truck drove up. Shit, he really yelled; I guess you're too far away to hear, but he really yelled."

Walter said, "You know what

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we ought to do? Firebomb the truck and snuff the driver."

All the other kids looked at him contemptuously. "They put you in the mental hospital for life if you act out like that."

"Sometimes for life," Pete Bride corrected. "Other times they 'build up a new personality that is socially viable.'"

"Then what should we do?" Walter said.

"You're twelve; you're safe."

"But suppose they change the law." Anyhow it did not assuage his anxiety to know that he was technically safe; the truck still came for others and still frightened him. He thought of the younger kids down at the Facility now, looking through the Cyclone fence hour by hour, day after day, waiting and marking the passage of time and hoping someone would come in and adopt them.

"You ever been down there?" he said to Pete Bride. "At the County Facility? All those really little kids, like babies some of them, just maybe a year old. And *they* don't even know what's in store."

"The babies get adopted," Zack Yablonski said. "It's the old ones that don't stand a chance. They're the ones that get you; like, they talk to people who come in and put on a good show, like they're desirable. But people know they wouldn't be there if they weren't — you know, undesirable."

"Let the air out of the tires," Walter said, his mind working.

"Of the truck? Hey, and you know if you drop a mothball in the gas tank, about a week later the motor wears out. We could do that."

Ben Blaire said, "But then they'd be after us."

"They're after us now," Walter said.

"I think we ought to firebomb the truck," Harry Gottlieb said, "but suppose there're kids in it. It'll burn them up. The truck picks up maybe — shit, I don't know. Five kids a day from different parts of the county."

"You know they even take dogs too?" Walter said. "And cats; you see the truck for that only about once a month. The pound truck it's called. Otherwise it's the same; they put them in a big chamber and suck the air out of their lungs and they die. They'd do that even to animals! Little animals!"

"I'll believe that when I see it," Harry Gottlieb said, derision on his face, and disbelief. "A truck that carries off dogs."

He knew it was true, though. Walter had seen the pound truck two different times. Cats, dogs, and mainly us, he thought glumly. I mean, if they'd start with us, it's

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natural they'd wind up taking people's pets, too; we're not that different. But what kind of a person would do that, even if it is the law? "Some laws are made to be kept, and some to be broken," he remembered from a book he had read. We ought to firebomb the pound truck first, he thought; that's the worst, that truck.

Why is it, he wondered, that the more helpless a creature, the easier it was for some people to snuff it? Like a baby in the womb; the original abortions, "pre-partums," or "pre-persons" they were called now. How could they defend themselves? Who would speak for them? All those lives, a hundred by each doctor a day...and all helpless and silent and then just dead. The fuckers, he thought. That's why they do it; they know they can do it; they get off on their macho power. And so a little thing that wanted to see the light of day is vacuumed out in less than two minutes. And the doctor goes on to the next chick.

There ought to be an organization, he thought, similar to the Mafia. Snuff the snuffers, or something. A contract man walks up to one of those doctors, pulls out a tube, and sucks the doctor into it, where he shrinks down like an unborn baby. A unborn baby doctor, with a stethoscope the size of a pinhead...he laughed, thinking of that.

Children don't know. But children know everything, knew too much. The abortion truck, as it drove along, played a Good Humor Man's jingle:

Jack and Jill
Went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water.

A tape loop in the sound system of the truck, built especially by Ampex for GM, blared that out when it wasn't actively nearing a seize. Then the driver shut off the sound system and glided along until he found the proper house. However, once he had the unwanted child in the back of the truck, and was either starting back to the County Facility or beginning another pre-person pick-up, he turned back on

Jack and Jill
Went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water.

Thinking to himself, Oscar Ferris, the driver of truck Three, finished, "Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after." What the hell's a crown? Ferris wondered. Probably a private part. He grinned. Probably Jack had been playing with it, or Jill, both of them together. Water, my ass, he thought. I know what they went off into the bushes for. Only, Jack fell down, and his thing broke right off. "Tough luck, Jill," he said aloud as he expertly drove the four-year-old truck along the

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winding curves of California Highway One.

Kids are like that, Ferris thought. Dirty and playing with dirty things, like themselves.

This was still wild and open country, and many stray children scratched about in the canyons and fields; he kept his eye open, and sure enough — off to his right scampered a small one, about six, trying to get out of sight. Ferris at once pressed the button that activated the siren of the truck. The boy froze, stood in fright, waited as the truck, still playing "Jack and Jill" coasted up beside him and came to a halt.

"Show me your D papers," Ferris said, without getting out of the truck; he leaned one arm out the window, showing his brown uniform and patch: his symbols of authority.

The boy had a scrawny look, like many strays, but, on the other hand, he wore glasses. Tow-headed, in jeans and T-shirt, he stared up in fright at Ferris, making no move to get out his identification.

"You got a D card or not?" Ferris said.

"W-w-w-what's a 'D card'?"

In his official voice, Ferris explained to the boy his rights under the law. "Your parent, either one, or legal guardian, fills out form 36-W, which is a formal statement of desirability. That they or him or her regard you as desirable. You don't have one? Legally, that makes you a stray, even if you have parents who want to keep you; they are subject to a fine of $500."

"Oh," the boy said. "Well, I lost it."

"Then a copy would be on file. They microdot all those documents and records. I'll take you in—"

"To the County Facility?" Pipe-cleaner legs wobbled in fear.

"They have thirty days to claim you by filling out the 36-W form. If they haven't done it by then—"

"My mom and dad never agree. Right now I'm staying with my dad."

"He didn't give you a D card to identify yourself with." Mounted transversally across the cab of the truck was a shotgun. There was always the possibility that trouble might break out when he picked up a stray. Reflexively, Ferris glanced up at it. It was there, all right, a pump shotgun. He had used it only five times in his law-enforcement career. It could blow a man into molecules. "I have to take you in," he said, opening the truck door and bringing out his keys. "There's another kid back there; you can keep each other company."

"No," the boy said. "I won't go." Blinking, he confronted Ferris, stubborn and rigid as stone.

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"Oh, you probably heard a lot of stories about the County Facility. It's only the warpies, the creepies, that get put to sleep; any nice normal-looking kid'll be adopted —we'll cut your hair and fix you up so you look professionally groomed. We want to find you a home. That's the whole idea. It's just a few, those who are — you know — ailing mentally or physically that no one wants. Some well-to-do individual will snap you up in a minute; you'll see. Then you won't be running around out here alone with no parents to guide you. You'll have new parents, and listen — they'll be paying heavy bread for you; so they'll take good care of you; hell, they'll *register* you. Do you see? It's more a temporary lodging place where we're taking you right now, to make you available to prospective new parents."

"But if nobody adopts me in a month —"

"Hell, you could fall off a cliff here at Big Sur and kill yourself. Don't worry. The desk at the Facility will contact your blood parents, and most likely they'll come forth with the Desirability Form (15A) sometime today even. And meanwhile you'll get a nice ride and meet a lot of new kids. And how often —"

"No," the boy said.

"This is to inform you," Ferris said, in a different tone, "that I am a County Official." He opened his truck door, jumped down, showed his gleaming metal badge to the boy. "I am Peace Officer Ferris and I now order you to enter by the rear of the truck."

A tall man approached them, walking with wariness; he, like the boy, wore jeans and a T-shirt, but no glasses.

"You the boy's father?" Ferris said.

The man, hoarsely, said, "Are you taking him to the pound?"

"We consider it a child protection shelter," Ferris said. "The use of the term 'pound' is a radical hippie slur, and distorts — deliberately — the overall picture of what we do."

Gesturing toward the truck, the man said, "You've got kids locked in there in those cages, have you?"

"I'd like to see your ID," Ferris said. "And I'd like to know if you've ever been arrested before."

"Arrested and found innocent? Or arrested and found guilty?"

"Answer my question, sir," Ferris said, showing his black flatpack that he used with adults to identify him as a County Peace Officer. "Who are you? Come on, let's see your ID.

The man said, "Ed Gantro is my name and I have a record. When I was eighteen, I stole four crates of Coca-Cola from a parked truck."

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"You were apprehended at the scene?"

"No," the man said. "When I took the empties back to cash in on the refunds. That's when they seized me. I served six months."

"Have you a Desirability Card for your boy here?" Ferris asked.

"We couldn't afford the $90 it cost."

"Well, now it'll cost you five hundred. You should have gotten it in the first place. My suggestion is that you consult an attorney." Ferris moved toward the boy, declaring officially, "I'd like you to join the other juveniles in the rear section of the vehicle." To the man he said, "Tell him to do as instructed."

The man hesitated and then said, "Tim, get in the goddamn truck. And we'll get a lawyer; we'll get the D card for you. It's futile to make trouble — technically you're a stray."

"'A stray,'" the boy said, regarding his father.

Ferris said, "Exactly right. You have thirty days, you know, to raise the —"

"Do you also take cats?" the boy said. "Are there any cats in there? I really like cats; they're all right."

"I handle only P.P. cases," Ferris said. "Such as yourself." With a key he unlocked the back of the truck. "Try not to relieve yourself while you're in the truck; it's hard as hell to get the odor and stains out."

The boy did not seem to understand the word; he gazed from Ferris to his father in perplexity.

"Just don't go to the bathroom while you're in the truck," his father explained. "They want to keep it sanitary, because that cuts down their maintenance costs." His voice was savage and grim.

"With stray dogs or cats," Ferris said, "they just shoot them on sight, or put out poison bait."

"Oh, yeah, I know that Warfarin," the boy's father said. "The animal eats it over a period of a week, and then he bleeds to death internally."

"With no pain," Ferris pointed out.

"Isn't that better than sucking the air from their lungs?" Ed Gantro said. "Suffocating them on a mass basis?"

"Well, with animals the county authorities —"

"I mean the children. Like Tim." His father stood beside him, and they both looked into the rear of the truck. Two dark shapes could be dimly discerned, crouching as far back as possible, in the starkest form of despair.

"Fleischhacker!" the boy Tim said. "Didn't you have a D card?"

"Because of energy and fuel

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shortages," Ferris was saying, "population must be radically cut. Or in ten years there'll be no food for anyone. This is one phase of—"

"I had a D card," Earl Fleischhacker said, "but my folks took it away from me. They didn't want me any more; so they took it back, and then they called for the abortion truck." His voice croaked; obviously he had been secretly crying.

"And what's the difference between a five-month-old fetus and what we have here?" Ferris was saying. "In both cases what you have is an unwanted child. They simply liberalized the laws."

Tim's father, staring at him, said, "Do you agree with these laws?"

"Well, it's really all up to Washington and what they decide will solve our needs in these days of crisis," Ferris said. "I only enforce their edicts. If this law changed — hell, I'd be trucking empty milk cartoons for recycling or something and be just as happy."

"*Just* as happy? You enjoy your work?"

Ferris said, mechanically, "It gives me the opportunity to move around a lot and to meet people."

Tim's father Ed Gantro said, "You are insane. This postpartum abortion scheme and the abortion laws before it where the unborn child had no legal rights — it was removed like a tumor. Look what it's come to. If an unborn child can be killed without due process, why not a born one? What I see in common in both cases is their helplessness; the organism that is killed had no chance, no ability, to protect itself. You know what? I want you to take me in, too. In the back of the truck with the three children."

"But the President and Congress have declared that when you're past twelve you have a soul," Ferris said. "I can't take you. It wouldn't be right."

"I have no soul," Tim's father said. "I got to be twelve and nothing happened. Take me along, too. Unless you can find my soul."

"Jeez," Ferris said.

"Unless you can show me my soul," Tim's father said, "unless you can specifically locate it, then I insist you take me in as no different from these kids."

Ferris said, "I'll have to use the radio to get in touch with the County Facility, see what they say."

"You do that," Tim's father said, and laboriously clambered up into the rear of the truck, helping Tim along with him. With the other two boys they waited while Peace Officer Ferris, with all his official indentification as to who he was, talked on his radio.

"I have here a Caucasian male,

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approximately thirty, who insists that he be transported to the County Facility with his infant son," Ferris was saying into his mike. "He claims to have no soul, which he maintains puts him in the class of subtwelve-year-olds. I don't have with me or know any test to detect the presence of a soul, at least any I can give out here in the boondocks that'll later on satisfy a court. I mean, he probably can do algebra and higher math; he seems to possess an intelligent mind. But—"

"Affirmative as to bringing him in," his superior's voice on the two-way radio came back to him. "We'll deal with him here."

"We're going to deal with you downtown," Ferris said to Tim's father, who, with the three smaller figures, was crouched down in the dark recesses of the rear of the truck. Ferris slammed the door, locked it — an extra precaution, since the boys were already netted by electronic bands — and then started up the truck.

Jack and Jill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water.
Jack fell down
And broke his crown

Somebody's sure going to get their crown broke, Ferris thought as he drove along the winding road, and it isn't going to be me.

"I can't do algebra," he heard Tim's father saying to the three boys. "So I can't have a soul."

The Fleishhacker boy said, snivelly, "I can, but I'm only nine. So what good does it do me?"

"That's what I'm going to use as my plea at the Facility," Tim's father continued. "Even long division was hard for me. I don't have a soul. I belong with you three little guys."

Ferris, in a loud voice, called back, "I don't want you soiling the truck, you understand? It costs us—"

"Don't tell me," Tim's father said, "because I wouldn't understand. It would be too complex, the proration and accrual and fiscal terms like that."

I've got a weirdo back there, Ferris thought, and was glad he had the pump shotgun mounted within easy reach. "You know the world is running out of everything," Ferris called back to them. "energy and apple juice and fuel and bread; we've got to keep the population down, and the embolisms from the Pill make it impossible—"

"None of us knows those big words," Tim's father broke in.

Angrily, and feeling baffled, Ferris said, "Zero population growth; that's the answer to the energy and food crisis. It's like — shit, it's like when they introduced the rabbit in Australia, and it had

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no natural enemies, and so it multiplied until, like people—"

"I do understand multiplication," Tim's father said. "And adding and subtraction. But that's all."

Four crazy rabbits flopping across the road, Ferris thought. People pollute the natural environment, he thought. What must this part of the country have been like before man? Well, he thought, with the postpartum abortions taking place in every county in the U.S. of A. we may see that day; we may stand and look once again upon a virgin land.

We, he thought. I guess there won't be any we. I mean, he thought, giant sentient computers will sweep out the landscape with their slotted video receptors and find it pleasing.

The thought cheered him up.

"Let's have an abortion!" Cynthia declared excitedly as she entered the house with an armload of syntho-groceries. "Wouldn't that be neat? Doesn't that turn you on?"

Her husband Ian Best said drily, "But first you have to get pregnant. So make an appointment with Dr. Guido — that should cost me only fifty or sixty dollars — and have your I.U.D. removed."

"I think it's slipping down anyhow. Maybe, if —" Her pert dark shag-haired head tossed in glee. "It probably hasn't worked properly since last year. So I could be pregnant now."

Ian said caustically, "You could put an ad in the *Free Press:* 'Man wanted to fish out I.U.D. with coathanger."

"But you see," Cynthia said, following him as he made his way to the master closet to hang up his status-tie and class-coat, "it's the in thing now, to have an abortion. Look, we do we have? A kid. We have Walter. Every time someone comes over to visit and sees him, I know they're wondering, 'Where did you screw up?' It's embarrassing." She added, "And the kind of abortions they give now, for women in early stages — it only costs one hundred dollars ... the price of ten gallons of gas! And you can talk about it with practically everybody who drops by for hours."

Ian turned to face her and said in a level voice, "Do you get to keep the embryo? Bring it home in a bottle or sprayed with special luminous paint so it glows in the dark like a night light?"

"In any color you want!"

"The *embryo?*"

"No, the bottle. And the color of the fluid. It's in a preservative solution, so really it's a lifetime acquisition. It even has a written guarantee. I think."

Ian folded his arms to keep

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himself calm: alpha state condition. "Do you know that there are people who would want to have a child? Even an ordinary dumb one? That go to the County Facility week after week looking for a little newborn baby? These ideas — there's been this world panic about overpopulation. Nine trillion humans stacked like kindling in every block of every city. Okay, if that were going on —" He gestured. "But what we have now is not *enough* children. Or don't you watch TV or read the *Times?*"

"It's a drag," Cynthia said. "For instance, today Walter came into the house freaked out because the abortion truck cruised by. It's a drag taking care of him. *You* have it easy; you're at work. But *me* —"

"You know what I'd like to do to that Gestapo abortion wagon? Have two ex-drinking buddies of mine armed with BARs, one on each side of the road. And when the wagon passes by —"

"It's a ventilated air-conditioned truck, not a wagon."

He glared at her and then went to the bar in the kitchen to fix himself a drink. Scotch will do, he decided. Scotch and milk, a good before-"dinner" drink.

As he mixed his drink, his son Walter came in. He had, on his face, an unnatural pallor.

"The 'bort truck went by today, didn't it?" Ian said.

"I thought maybe —"

"No way. Even if your mother and I saw a lawyer and had a legal document drawn up, an un-D Form, you're too old. So relax."

"I know intellectually," Walter said, "but —"

"'Do not seek to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee," Ian quoted (inaccurately). "Listen, Walt, let me lay something on you." He took a big, long drink of Scotch and milk. "The name of all this is, *kill me.* Kill them when they're the size of a fingernail, or a baseball, or later on, if you haven't done it already, suck the air out of the lungs of a ten-year-old boy and let him die. It's a certain kind of woman advocating this all. They used to call them 'castrating females.' Maybe that was once the right term, except that these women, these hard cold women, didn't just want to — well, they want to do in the *whole* boy or man, make all of them dead, not just the part that makes him a man. Do you see?"

"No," Walter said, but in a dim sense, very frightening, he did.

After another hit of his drink, Ian said, "And we've got one living right here, Walter. Here in our very house."

"What do we have living here?"

"What the Swiss psychiatrists call a *kindermörder,*" Ian said, deliberately choosing a term he

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knew his boy wouldn't understand. "You know what," he said, "you and I could get onto an Amtrak coach and head north and just keep on going until we reached Vancouver, British Columbia, and we could take a ferry to Vancouver Island and never be seen by anybody down here again."

"But what about mom?"

"I would send her a cashier's check," Ian said. "Each month. And she would be quite happy with that."

"It's cold up there, isn't it?" Walter said. "I mean, they have hardly any fuel and they wear —"

"About like San Francisco. Why? Are you afraid of wearing a lot of sweaters and sitting close to the fireplace? What did you see today that frightened you a hell of a lot more?"

"Oh, yeah." He nodded somberly.

"We could live on a little island off Vancouver Island and raise our own food. You can plant stuff up there and it grows. And the truck won't come there; you'll never see it again. They have different laws. The women up there are different. There was this one girl I knew when I was up there for a while, a long time ago; she had long black hair and smoked Players cigarettes all the time and never ate anything or ever stopped talking. Down here we're seeing a civilization in which the desire by women to destroy their own —" Ian broke off; his wife had walked into the kitchen.

"If you drink any more of that stuff," she said to him, "you'll barf it up."

"Okay," Ian said irritably. "Okay!"

"And don't yell," Cynthia said. "I thought for dinner tonight it'd be nice if you took us out. Dal Rey's said on TV they have steak for early comers."

Wrinkling his nose, Walter said, "They have raw oysters."

"Blue points," Cynthia said. "In the half shell, on ice. I love them. All right, Ian? Is it decided?"

To his son Walter, Ian said, "A raw blue point oyster looks like nothing more on earth than what the surgeon —" He became silent, then. Cynthia glared at him, and his son was puzzled. "Okay," he said, "but I get to order steak."

"Me too," Walter said.

Finishing his drink, Ian said more quietly, "When was the last time you fixed dinner here in the house? For the three of us?"

"I fixed you that pigs' ears and rice dish on Friday," Cynthia said. "Most of which went to waste because it was something new and on the nonmandatory list. Remember, *dear?*"

Ignoring her, Ian said to his son, "Of course, that type of

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woman will sometimes, even often, be found up there, too. She has existed throughout all time and all cultures. But since Canada has no law permitting postpartum —" He broke off. "It's the carton of milk talking," he explained to Cynthia. "They adulterate it these days with sulfur. Pay no attention or sue somebody; the choice is yours."

Cynthia, eying him, said, "Are you running a fantasy number in your head again about splitting?"

"Both of us," Walter broke in. "Dad's taking me with him."

"Where?" Cynthia said, casually.

Ian said, "Wherever the Amtrak track leads us."

"We're going to Vancouver Island in Canada," Walter said.

"Oh, really?" Cynthia said.

After a pause Ian said, "Really."

"And what the shit am I supposed to do when you're gone? Peddle my ass down at the local bar? How'll I meet the payments on the various —"

"I will continually mail you checks," Ian said. "Bonded by giant banks."

"Sure. You bet. Yep. Right."

"You could come along," Ian said, "and catch fish by leaping into English Bay and grinding them to death with your sharp teeth. You could rid British Columbia of its fish population overnight. All those ground-up fish, wondering vaguely what happened ... swimming along one minute and then this — ogre, this fish-destroying monster with a single luminous eye in the center of its forehead, falls on them and grinds them into grit. There would soon be a legend. News like that spreads. At least among the last surviving fish."

"Yeah, but Dad," Walter said, "suppose there are no surviving fish."

"Then it will have been all in vain," Ian said, "except for your mother's own personal pleasure at having bitten to death an entire species in British Columbia, where fishing is the largest industry anyhow, and so many other species depend on it for survival."

"But then everyone in British Columbia will be out of work," Walter said.

"No," Ian said, "they will be cramming the dead fish into cans to sell to Americans. You see, Walter, in the olden days, before your mother multitoothedly bit to death all the fish in British Columbia, the simple rustics stood with stick in hand, and when a fish swam past, they whacked the fish over the head. This will *create* jobs, not eliminate them. Millions of cans of suitably marked —"

"You know," Cynthia said quietly, "he believes what you tell him."

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Ian said, "What I tell him is true." Although not, he realized, in a literal sense. To his wife he said, "I'll take you out to dinner. Get our ration stamps, put on that blue knit blouse that shows off your boobs; that way you'll get a lot of attention and maybe they won't remember to collect the stamps."

"What's a 'boob'?" Walter asked.

"Something fast becoming obsolete," Ian said, "like the Pontiac GTO. Except as an ornament to be admired and squeezed. Its function is dying away." As is our race, he thought, once we gave full rein to those who would destroy the unborn — in other words, the most helpless creatures alive.

"A boob," Cynthia said severely to her son, "is a mammary gland that ladies possess which provides milk to their young."

"Generally there are two of them," Ian said. "Your operational boob and then your backup boob, in case there is power failure in the operational one. I suggest the elimination of a step in all this pre-person abortion mania," he said. "We will send all the boobs in the world to the County Facilities. The milk, if any, will be sucked out of them, by mechanical means of course; they will become useless and empty, and then the young will die naturally, deprived of many and all sources of nourishment."

"There's formula," Cynthia said, witheringly. "Similac and those. I'm going to change so we can go out." She turned and strode toward their bedroom.

"You know," Ian said after her, "if there was any way you could get me classified as a pre-person, you'd send me there. To the Facility with the greatest facility." And, he thought, I'll bet I wouldn't be the only husband in California who went. There'd be plenty others. In the same bag as me, then as now.

"Sounds like a plan," Cynthia's voice came to him dimly; she had heard.

"It's not just a hatred for the helpless," Ian Best said. "More is involved. Hatred of what? Of everything that grows?" You blight them, he thought, before they grow big enough to have muscle and the tactics and skill for fight — big like I am in relation to you, with my fully developed musculature and weight. So much easier when the other person — I should say pre-person — is floating and dreaming in the amniotic fluid and knows nothing about how to nor the need to hit back.

Where did the motherly virtues go to? he asked himself. When mothers *especially* protected what was small and weak and defenseless?

Our competitive society, he decided. The survival of the strong.

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Not the fit, he thought; just those who hold the *power.* And are not going to surrender it to the next generation: it is the powerful and evil old against the helpless and gentle new.

"Dad," Walter said, "are we really going to Vancouver Island in Canada and raise real food and not have anything to be afraid of any more?"

Half to himself, Ian said, "Soon as I have the money."

"I know what that means. It's a 'we'll see' number you say. We aren't going, are we?" He watched his father's face intently. "She won't let us, like taking me out of school and like that; she always brings up that ... right?"

"It lies ahead for us someday," Ian said doggedly. "Maybe not this month but someday, sometime. I promise."

"And there's no abortion trucks there."

"No. None. Canadian law is different."

"Make it soon, Dad. Please."

His father fixed himself a second Scotch and milk and did not answer; his face was somber and unhappy, almost as if he was about to cry.

In the rear of the abortion truck three children and one adult huddled, jostled by the turning of the truck. They fell against the restraining wire that separated them, and Tim Gantro's father felt keen despair at being cut off mechanically from his own boy. A nightmare during day, he thought. Caged like animals; his noble gesture had brought only more suffering: to him.

"Why'd you say you don't know algebra?" Tim asked, once. "I know you know even calculus and trig-something; you went to Stanford University."

"I want to show," he said, "that either they ought to kill all of us or none of us. But not divide along these bureaucratic arbitrary lines. 'When does the soul enter the body?' What kind of rational question is that in this day and age? It's Medieval." In fact, he thought, it's a pretext — a pretext to prey on the helpless. And he was not helpless. The abortion truck had picked up a fully grown man, with all his knowledge, all his cunning. How are they going to handle me? he asked himself. Obviously I have what all men have; if they have souls, then so do I. If not, then I don't, but on what real basis can they "put me to sleep"? I am not weak and small, not an ignorant child cowering defenselessly. I can argue the sophistries with the best of the county lawyers; with the D.A. himself, if necessary.

If they snuff me, he thought, they will have to snuff everyone,

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including themselves. And that is not what this is all about. This is a con game by which the established, those who already hold all the key economic and political posts, keep the youngsters out of it — murder them if necessary. There is, he thought, in the land, a hatred by the old of the young, a hatred and a fear. So what will they do with me? I am in their age group, and I am caged up in the back of this abortion truck. I pose, he thought, a different kind of threat: I am one of them but on the other side, with the stray dogs and cats and babies and infants. Let them figure it out; let a new St. Thomas Aquinas arise who can unravel this.

"All I know," he said aloud, "is dividing and multiplying and subtracting. I'm even hazy on my fractions."

"But you used to know that!" Tim said.

"Funny how you forget it after you leave school," Ed Gantro said. "You kids are probably better at it than I am."

"Dad, they're going to *snuff* you," his son Tim said, wildly. "Nobody'll adopt you. Not at your age. You're too *old*."

"Let's see," Ed Gantro said. "The binomial theorem. How does that go? I can't get it all together; something about a and b." And as it leaked out of his head, as had his immortal soul ... he chuckled to himself. I cannot pass the soul test, he thought. At least not talking like that. I am a dog in the gutter, an animal in a ditch.

The whole mistake of the pro-abortion people from the start, he said to himself, was the *arbitrary* line they drew. An embryo is not entitled to American Constitutional rights and can be killed, legally, by a doctor. But a fetus was a "person," with rights, at least for a while; and then the pro-abortion crowd decided that even a seven-month fetus was not "human" and could be killed, legally, by a licensed doctor. And, one day, a newborn baby — it is a vegetable; it can't focus its eyes, it understands nothing, nor talks ... the pro-abortion lobby argued in court, and won, with their contention that a newborn baby was only a fetus expelled by accident or organic processes from the womb. But, even then, where was the line to be drawn finally? When the baby smiled its first smile? When it spoke its first word or reached for its initial time for some toy it enjoyed? The legal line was relentlessly pushed back and back. And now the most savage and arbitrary definition of all: when it could perform "higher math."

That made the ancient Greeks, of Plato's time, nonhumans, since arithmetic was unknown to them,

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only geometry; and algebra was an Arab invention, much later in history. *Arbitrary.* It was not a theological arbitrariness either; it was a mere legal one. The Church had long since — from the start, in fact — maintained that even the zygote, and the embryo that followed, was as sacred a life form as any that walked the earth. They had seen what would come of arbitrary defintions of "Now the soul enters the body," or in modern terms, "Now it is a person entitled to the full protection of the law like everyone else." What was so sad was the sight now of the small child playing bravely in his yard day by day, trying to hope, trying to pretend a security he did not have.

Well, he thought, we'll see what they do with me; I am thirty-five years old, with a Master's Degree from Stanford. Will they put me in a cage for thirty days, with a plastic food dish and a water source and a place — in plain sight to relieve myself — and if no one adopts me, will they consign me to automatic death along with the others?

I am risking a lot, he thought. But they picked up my son today, and the risk began then, when they had him, not when I stepped forward and became a victim myself.

He looked about at the three frightened boys and tried to think of something to tell them — not just his own son but all three.

"'Look,'" he said, quoting. "'I tell you a sacred secret. We shall not all sleep in death. We shall —'" But then he could not remember the rest. Bummer, he thought dismally. "'We shall wake up,'" he said, doing the best he could. "'In a flash. In the twinkling of an eye.'"

"Cut the noise," the driver of the truck, from beyond his wire mesh, growled. "I can't concentrate on this fucking road." He added, "You know, I can squirt gas back there where you are, and you'll all pass out; it's for obstreperous pre-persons we pick up. So you want to knock it off, or have me punch the gas button?"

"We won't say anything," Tim said quickly, with a look of mute terrified appeal at his father. Urging him silently to conform.

His father said nothing. The glance of urgent pleading was too much for him, and he capitulated. Anyhow, he reasoned, what happened in the truck was not crucial. It was when they reached the County Facility — where there would be, at the first sign of trouble newspaper and TV reporters.

So they rode in silence, each with his own fears, his own schemes. Ed Gantro brooded to himself, perfecting in his head what he would do — what he *had* to do. And not just for Tim but all the

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P.P. abortion candidates; he thought through the ramifications as the truck lurched and rattled on.

As soon as the truck parked in the restricted lot of the County Facility and its rear doors had been swung open, Sam B. Carpenter, who ran the whole goddamn operation, walked over, stared, said, "You've got a grown man in there, Ferris. In fact, you comprehend what you've got? A protester, that's what you've latched onto."

"But he insisted he doesn't know any math higher than adding," Ferris said.

To Ed Gantro, Carpenter said, "Hand me your wallet. I want your actual name, Social Security number, police region stability ident — come on, I want to know who you really are."

"He's just a rural type," Ferris said, as he watched Gantro pass over his lumpy wallet.

"And I want confirm prints offa his feet," Carpenter said. "The full set. Right away — priority A." He liked to talk that way.

An hour later he had the reports back from the jungle of interlocking security-data computers from the fake-pastoral restricted area in Virginia. "This individual graduated from Stanford College with a degree in math. And then got a master's in psychology, which he has, no doubt about it, been subjecting us to. We've got to get him out of here."

"I did have a soul," Gantro said, "but I lost it."

"How?" Carpenter demanded, seeing nothing about that on Gantro's official records.

"An embolism. The portion of my cerebral cortex, where my soul was, got destroyed when I accidentally inhaled the vapors of insect spray. That's why I've been living out in the country eating roots and grubs, with my boy here, Tim."

"We'll run an EEG on you," Carpenter said.

"What's that?" Gantro said. "One of those brain tests?"

To Ferris, Carpenter said, "The law says the soul enters at twelve years. And you bring in this individual male adult well over thirty. We could be charged with murder. We've got to get rid of him. You drive him back to exactly where you found him and dump him off. If he won't voluntarily exit from the truck, gas the shit out of him and then throw him out. That's a national-security order. Your job depends on it, also your status with the penal code of this state."

"I belong here," Ed Gantro said. "I'm a dummy."

"And his kid," Carpenter said. "He's probably a mathematical

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mental mutant like you see on TV. They set you up; they've probably already alerted the media. Take them all back and gas them and dump them wherever you found them or, barring that, anyhow out of sight."

"You're getting hysterical," Ferris said, with anger. "Run the EEG and the brain scan on Gantro, and probably we'll have to release him, but these three juveniles—"

"All geniuses," Carpenter said. "All part of the setup, only you're too stupid to know. Kick them out of the truck and off our premises, and deny — you get this? — deny you ever picked any of the four of them up. Stick to that story."

"Out of the vehicle," Ferris ordered, pressing the button that lifted the wire mesh gates.

The three boys scrambled out. But Ed Gantro remained.

"He's not going to exit voluntarily," Carpenter said. "Okay, Gantro, we'll physically expel you." He nodded to Ferris, and the two of them entered the back of the truck. A moment later they had deposited Ed Gantro on the pavement of the parking lot.

"Now you're just a plain citizen," Carpenter said, with relief. "You can claim all you want, but you have no proof."

"Dad," Tim said, "how are we going to get home?" All three boys clustered around Ed Gantro.

"You could call somebody from up there," the Fleischhacker boy said. "I bet if Walter Best's dad has enough gas he'd come and get us. He takes a lot of long drives; he has a special coupon."

"Him and his wife, Mrs. Best, quarrel a lot," Tim said. "So he likes to go driving at night alone; I mean, without her."

Ed Gantro said, "I'm staying here. I want to be locked up in a cage."

"But we can *go*," Tim protested. Urgently, he plucked at his dad's sleeve. "That's the whole point, isn't it? They let us go when they saw you. We did it!"

Ed Gantro said to Carpenter, "I insist on being locked up with the other pre-persons you have in there." He pointed at the gaily imposing, esthetic solid-green-painted Facility Building.

To Mr. Sam B. Carpenter, Tim said, "Call Mr. Best, out where we were, on the peninsula. It's a 669 prefix number. Tell him to come and get us, and he will. I promise. Please."

The Fleishhacker boy added, "There's only one Mr. Best listed in the phonebook with a 669 number. Please, mister."

Carpenter went indoors, to one of the Facility's many official phones, looked up the number. Ian Best. He punched the number.

"You have reached a semi-

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working, semiloafing number," a man's voice, obviously that of someone half-drunk, responded. In the background Carpenter could hear the cutting tones of a furious woman, excoriating Ian Best.

"Mr. Best," Carpenter said, "several persons whom you know are stranded down at Fourth and A Streets in Verde Gabriel, an Ed Gantro and his son Tim, a boy identified as Ronald, or Donald Fleischhacker, and another unidentified minor boy. The Gantro boy suggested you would not object to driving down here to pick them up and take them home."

"Fourth and A Streets," Ian Best said. A pause. "Is that the pound?"

"The County Facility," Carpenter said.

"You son of a bitch," Best said. "Sure I'll come get them; expect me in twenty minutes. You have *Ed* Gantro there as a pre-person? Do you know he graduated from Stanford University?"

"We are aware of this," Carpenter said stonily. "But they are not being detained; they are merely — here. Not — I repeat not — in custody."

Ian Best, the drunken slur gone from his voice, said, "There'll be reporters from all the media there before I get there." Click. He had hung up.

Walking back outside, Carpenter said to the boy Tim, "Well, it seems you mickey-moused me into notifying a rabid anti-abortionist activist of your presence here. How neat, how really neat."

A few moments passed, and then a bright-red Mazda sped up to the entrance of the Facility. A tall man with a light beard got out, unwound camera and audio gear, walked leisurely over to Carpenter. "I understand you may have a Stanford MA in math here at the Facility," he said in a neutral, casual voice. "Could I interview him for a possible story?"

Carpenter said, "We have booked no such person. You can inspect our records." But the reporter was already gazing at the three boys clustered around Ed Gantro.

In a loud voice the reporter called, "Mr. Gantro?"

"Yes, sir," Ed Gantro replied.

Christ, Carpenter thought. We did lock him in one of our official vehicles and transport him here; it'll hit all the papers. Already a blue van with the markings of a TV station had rolled onto the lot. And, behind it, two more cars.

ABORTION FACILITY SNUFFS STANFORD GRAD

That was how it read in Carpenter's mind. Or.

COUNTY ABORTION FACILITY FOILED IN ILLEGAL ATTEMPT TO ....

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And so forth. A spot on the 6:00 evening TV news. Gantro, and when he showed up, Ian Best who was probably an attorney, surrounded by tape recorders and mikes and video cameras.

We have mortally fucked up, he thought. Mortally fucked up. They at Sacramento will cut our appropriation; we'll be reduced to hunting down stray dogs and cats again, like before. Bummer.

When Ian Best arrived in his coal-burning Mercedes-Benz, he was still a little stoned. To Ed Gantro he said, "You mind if we take a scenic roundabout route back?"

"By way of what?" Ed Gantro said. He wearily wanted to leave now. The little flow of media people have interviewed him and gone. He had made his point, and now he felt drained, and he wanted to go home.

Ian Best said, "By way of Vancouver Island, British Columbia."

With a smile, Ed Gantro said, "These kids should go right to bed. My kid and the other two. Hell, they haven't even had any dinner."

"We'll stop at a McDonald's stand," Ian Best said. "And then we can take off for Canada, where the fish are, and lots of mountains that still have snow on them, even this time of year."

"Sure," Gantro said, grinning. "We can go there."

"You want to?" Ian Best scrutinized him. "You really want to?"

"I'll settle a few things, and then, sure, you and I can take off together."

"Son of a bitch," Best breathed. "You mean it."

"Yes," he said. "I do. Of course, I have to get my wife's agreement. You can't go to Canada unless your wife signs a document in writing where she won't follow you. You become what's called a 'landed Immigrant.'"

"Then I've got to get Cynthia's written permission."

"She'll give it to you. Just agree to send support money."

"You think she will? She'll let me go?"

"Of course," Gantro said.

"You actually think our wives will let us go," Ian Best said as he and Gantro herded the children into the Mercedes-Benz. "I'll bet you're right; Cynthia'd love to get rid of me. You know what she calls me, right in front of Walter? 'An agressive coward,' and stuff like that. She has no respect for me."

"Our wives," Gantro said, "will let us go." But he knew better.

He looked back at the Facility manager, Mr. Sam B. Carpenter, and at the truck driver, Ferris, who, Carpenter had told the press

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and TV, was as of this date fired and was a new and inexperienced employee anyhow.

"No," he said. "They won't let us go. None of them will."

Clumsily, Ian Best fiddled with the complex mechanism that controlled the funky coal-burning engine. "Sure they'll let us go; look, they're just standing there. What can they do, after what you said on TV and what that one reporter wrote up for a feature story?"

"I don't mean them," Gantro said tonelessly.

"We could just run."

"We are caught," Gantro said. "Caught and can't get out. You ask Cynthia, though. It's worth a try."

"We'll never see Vancouver Island and the great ocean-going ferries steaming in out of the fog, will we?" Ian Best said.

"Sure we will, eventually." But he knew it was a lie, an absolute lie, just like you know sometimes when you say something that for no rational reason you know is absolutely true.

They drove from the lot, out onto the public street.

"It feels good," Ian Best said, "to be free ... right?" The three boys nodded, but Ed Gantro said nothing. Free, he thought. Free to go home. To be caught in a larger net, shoved into a greater truck than the metal mechanical one the County Facility uses.

"This is a great day," Ian Best said.

"Yes," Ed Gantro agreed. "A great day in which a noble and effective blow has been struck for all helpless things, anything of which you could say, 'It is alive.'"

Regarding him intently in the narrow tricky light, Ian Best said, "I don't want to go home; I want to take off for Canada now."

"We *have* to go home," Ed Gantro reminded him. "Temporarily, I mean. To wind things up. Legal matters, pick up what we need."

Ian Best, as he drove, said, "We'll never get there, to British Columbia and Vancouver Island and Stanley Park and English Bay and where they grow food and keep horses and where they have the ocean-going ferries."

"No, we won't," Ed Gantro said.

"Not now, not even later?"

"Not ever," Ed Gantro said.

"That's what I was afraid of," Best said and his voice broke and his driving got funny. "That's what I thought from the beginning."

They drove in silence, then, with nothing to say to each other. There was nothing left to say.

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"Of course the animators' union is giving us a lot of flack."

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The first new work of fiction ("Do NOT call it a poem." —JM) in ten years from Judith Merril, who as F&SF's books columnist in the late 1960's, regularly stimulated and enraged our readers . . .

In the Land of Unblind

by JUDITH MERRIL

You know how it is *indown*
you close your eyes(s) and let or
take yourself between a stumble
crawl and lazyfloat
I mean when you get past
the rubbage really *indown*
there's no seefeeltouch
not the skinside *upout* way
blindbalance cannot tell for
sure if a touching is over or
under or on when the feeling is
inside your skin
I mean *indown*
you know how it is.

In the land of unblind the one
eyed woman is terribilified.

No light but
the infires flickeredimglow and
they all keep their eyes closed
so scrabbleswoop and stumblesoar
flycreep
in the fearableautiful nolightno
dark of eacheveryothers infires
—what need to
cover or show?
they canwillnot looksee except
for the one-eyed
me I wonder:

What happens if a person takes
a light*indown*
Before
I opened up one apple-eye I too
flewstumbled graspgropegleaned
in holystonemaskhunger
then one time
in that hell-eden innocence I
touched a man and he touched me
you know the way it happens some
times later or before or inbe
tween we touched *upout*
I mean
where skins can touch and
some place
or the other
we remembered as
in the other
we felt fate upon us.

Blindunblind future past which
one is when?

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Upout
his openwide eyes full of hunger
and some kind of hate
and I tasting
somehow hate
fulhunger over all the skins in
side my mouth:—

I love you! (he said)
Witchcraft! I had to come!
You must come! Magic!
I love you!
so:
I came we loved when our skins
touched inside sometimesalmost
remembering *indown*
not quite.

Then oneanother
soundless *indown* time
still blindunblind
I touched a man and touching me
he spoke words I c/wouldnot hear
just scramblescared away
you know it happens
sometime in between
after before when
meeting *upout* all our eyes and
ears and mouths were open:—

I love you! (he said)
We had to come together!
Remember (he said) *beforewords*
I c/wouldnot
I love you
(I said) *Witchcraft!*
all the skins inside my mouth
were tasting soursweet terror as
I ran he spoke
again(?)
Open your eyes! (he said)

One time soon (?)
indown still fearful
fearful still for still I
do not open more than one
my first *indown*eye opened seeing
stir alive some ghost of memory
pastfuture
in between
that time I touched no man but
One time
upout you know before or after
my first man was there
again (?)
it was only skinsight airvoice
we unshared how it waswouldbe to
touch *indown* I did not know he
did not know there was an *indown*
not to remember frightened
he went away.

And one time
indown one-eye just slit open in
dimglow of flickerdrift infires
a man touched me and I could see
indown the face I touchedspoketo
of course he c/woulcnot hear
so
but
when you know
we met *upout* eyes open all the
hungers in my mouth turned sweet
remembering beforewords:—

I love you! (he said)
Witchcraft/ I had to come!
You made me come! Magic!

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I love you!

and even with
*upout*skintouch echopremonitions
stirring he wouldcouldnot know
how deep we touched his hunger
fear soured all the skins inside
my mouth

I had to go away.

Again (?)
one time
indown I met a man with one eye
open like my own in flickerdim
infireglow seeing each both how
horribleautiful each otherself
fruit flower and fester touching
we spoke beforewords
and when you know
the way some time
we met *upout* all eyes and ears
and mouths wide open great new
hungers pungentsweet on all the
skins inside remembering *indown*
bebackwords neverquite to know
which placetime was remembering
or wherewhen it waswouldbe that
we first felt fate upon us—
We love (we did not say)
We had to come
Witchcraft! (we laught) we love
and when
skins touch inside remembering
predicting sometimesalmost like
*indown*touch *indown*talk
and yet—

I wonder what it's like *indown*
for the two-eyed?

Coming Soon

Next month, almost another special issue, with such choice items as "The Wonderful, Imperishable, Darkly Reasonable, Whatever-I-Type-Is-True Machine" by Harry Harrison and Barry N. Malzberg; "Three Songs For Enigmatic Lovers," by Brian W. Aldiss; "Space Shoes of the Gods," a parody by John Sladek and "Mushroom World," a gripping sf adventure novella by Stephen Tall.

And coming up in the December or January issue, a truly mind-boggling item, VENUS ON THE HALF-SHELL, a novel by KILGORE TROUT. That's right, Kilgore Trout! More on this later.

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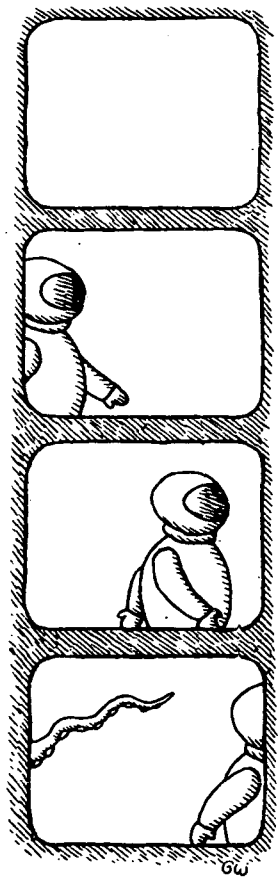
FRANKENSTEIN RE-REDUX

It has been fascinating to watch the process over the past decade or so by which certain films, made for commercial and not artistic reasons and certainly never considered as worthy of esthetic consideration in the era in which they were made, have become works not only to be considered seriously but to be imitated, or at least used as the basis for contemporary inspiration. This has happened primarily because of television and its mass showing of films which probably would never have been reshown theatrically, and the field this has been most true of is the horror/supernatural film. Twenty years ago it would have been quite inconceivable that those B-grade, quick money-makers turned out by Universal and other such studios would have been the inspiration for mass cults, serious analytical dissection, and films for which they served as direct inspiration, made by serious filmmakers.

In the past year or so, we have had a Dan Curtis-produced Frankenstein that was sturdy but uninspired, and a Christopher Isherwood-written Frankenstein that had moments of great style and beauty. Now we have *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein*, and whether you like him or not,

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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Warhol has been an enormous influence on the visual arts of our time. Just to compound confusion, "Andy Warhol's Frankenstein" was written and directed by Paul Morrissey; the relationship between Morrissey and Warhol, as a matter of fact, is equivalent to that of the Baron and the monster, though no one has quite decided which plays which role. In any case, the movie is a product of the Warhol Factory, and shows it.

In *this* variation on the theme, the setting is a heavily turreted castle *cum* laboratory in which live the Baron, his sister and their two children (yes, you read that right). The Baron has perfected a female zombie construct who is a success, and is now working on a male; the two are to breed a race of beings bearing the characteristics of the Serbian master race (yes, you read *that* right, too). The Baroness, feeling neglected, takes as a body servant (literally) a well endowed young laborer who has just had an unfortunate experience. While coming home from a bordello with a friend, he has been knocked unconscious and wakes to find his friend's headless body beside him. He is unnerved, as he serves dinner the first night, to see his friend's head on entirely the wrong body, seated at table. He investigates, learns the awful truth of the Baron's experiments, is caught and strung up, but is saved by his friend — or to be accurate, his friend's head. At the finale, the lab is littered with corpses, our hero is still strung up, and the two children are unpacking their daddy's surgical instruments.

There's not really much to be said about this film. It has a lot of explicit sex, but really isn't very sexually interesting. It has a fair amount of black humor, but isn't really very funny. It has an excessive amount of gore (the decapitation is extremely graphic, as is the disemboweling of the Baron — to avoid detail, let's just say the word disembowel is visually realized), but isn't frightening; there's not an iota of suspense in it.

What I *did* like about it, and what makes it worth seeing (if you have a strong stomach), is the 3-D process in which it is filmed. It's far better than I remember the old 50s experiments to be, and the filming has some wonderful moments which take full advantage of it: the Baroness and the children in a pony trap weaving their way through a grove of birches; the laboratory seen through a fish tank with the fish floating before you; a swarm of bats flying into your face. Of course, you have to put up with a great many organs and large amounts of blood coming at you, too.

(*continued on page 174*)

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From one of science fiction's consistently most engaging storytellers, a good, strong novelet on one of sf's classic themes, after-the-holocaust.

In Iron Years

by GORDON R. DICKSON

Slightly after midday, the rain began. Jeebee wiped his glasses and turned the visor of his cap down to keep as much of the falling moisture off them as possible. Wet, they gave him a blurred, untrustworthy image of his surroundings; and although this rolling plains country with its sparse patches of timber and only an occasional devastated farmstead seemed deserted enough, nothing could be certain. In the beginning, in spite of it being March, the rain was not cold; and although it soon soaked through the blanket material of his jacket at the inside of his elbows and upper back, above the packsack, and with each step made damper and more heavy the front of his trousers above the knees, he was not uncomfortable.

But, as the afternoon wore on, the darkness of the heavy cloud cover increased, the temperature dropped, and the rain turned to sleet, whipped against the naked skin of his face as the wind strengthened from the east. Like an animal, he thought of shelter and began to cast around for it, so that when a little later he came to the pile of lumber that had once been a farmhouse, before being dynamited or bulldozed into a scrap heap, he gave up travel for the day and began searching for a gap in the rubble. He found one at last, a hole that seemed to lead far enough in under the loose material to indicate a fairly waterproof overhead. He crawled inside, pushing his pack before him, braced against having stumbled on the den of some wild dog — or worse.

But no human or beast appeared to dispute his entrance,

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and the opening went back in further than he had guessed. He was pleased to hear the patter of the rain only distantly through what was above him, while feeling everything completely dry and dusty around him. He kept on crawling, as far in as he could until suddenly his right hand, reaching out before him, slid over an edge into emptiness.

He stopped to check, found some space above his head, and risked lighting a stub of candle. Its light shone ahead of him, down into an untouched basement garage, with walls of cinder blocks and a solid roof of collapsed house overhead.

He memorized this scene below as best he could, put the candle out to save as much of it as possible, and let himself down into the thick, dust-smelling darkness, until he felt level floor under his bootsoles. Once down, he relit the candle stub and looked around.

The place was a treasure trove. Plainly no one had set foot here since the moment in which the house had been destroyed, and nothing had been looted from the cellar's original contents.

That night he slept warm and dry with even the luxury of a kerosene lantern to light him; and when he left the place three days later through a separate, carefully tunneled hole much larger than the one by which he had entered, he was rich. He left still more riches behind him. There was more than he could carry, but it was not just a lack of charity to his fellow human beings that made him carefully cover and disguise both openings to the place he had found. It was the hard-learned lesson to cover his trail, so that no one would suspect someone else had been here and would try to track him for what he carried. Otherwise, he would not have cared about the goods he left behind, for his path led still westward to Montana, to his brother Martin's Twin Peaks ranch — eight hundred miles yet distant.

His riches, however, could not help going to his head a little. For one thing, though he realized he was taking a calculated risk, he had ridden off on the motorcycle he had found among other items in the cellar. It was true that it was a light little trail bike and worth a fortune if he could only come across some community civilized enough to trade, rather then simply kill him for it. It was also true that on it, in open country like this, he could probably outrun anyone else, including riders on horseback. But it could be heard coming from a mile away, and gas was scarce. Also, possession of the bike was as open an invitation to attack and robbery as a fat wallet flourished in a den of thieves.

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Outside of the motorcycle, however, Jeebee had selected well. He was now wearing some other man's old but still solidly seamed leather jacket; his belt was tight with screwdrivers, pruning knives, and other simple hand tools, and his pockets were newly heavy with boxes of .22-long rifle shells, ammunition for the .22 bolt-action rifle he had been carrying. In addition, he had canned goods, some of which might still be eatable — you could never tell until you opened a can and smelled its contents — and wrapped around his waist above the belt was a good twenty feet of heavy, solid-linked metal chain taken from under the ruins of what had evidently been a doghouse, in the back yard behind the debris of the main building.

He had sense enough by this time not to follow any roads. So he cut off between the hills, on the same compass course westward that he had been holding to for the past two weeks, ever since he had run for his life to get away from Abbotsville. Even to think of Abbotsville now set a cold sickness crawling about in the pit of his stomach. It had taken a miracle to save him. His buck fever had held true to the last; and, at the last, when Bule Mannerly had risen up out of the weeds with the shotgun pointed at his head, he had been unable to shoot, though Bule was only seconds away from shooting him. Only the dumb luck of someone else from the village firing at Jeebee just then and scaring Bule into hitting the dirt, had cleared the way to the hills.

It was not just lack of guts on his part that had kept him from firing, Jeebee reminded himself now, strongly, steering the bike along a hillside in the sunlight and the light March breeze. He, more than anyone else, should be able to remember that, like everyone else, he was the product of his own psychobiological pattern; and it was that, more than anything else, which had stopped him from shooting Bule.

Once, in a civilized world, reactions like his had signaled a survival type of pb pattern. Now, they signaled the opposite. He glanced at his reflection in the rearview mirror on the rod projecting from the left handlebar of the bike. The image of his lower face looked back at him, brutal with untrimmed beard and crafty with wrinkles dried into skin tanned by the sun and wind. But above these signs, as he tilted his head to look, the visor of his cap had shaded the skin and his forehead was still pale, the eyes behind the round glasses still blue and innocent. The upper half of his features gave him away. He had no instinctive courage — only a sense

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of duty — a duty to the fledgling science which had barely managed to be born before the world had fallen apart.

It was that duty that pushed him now. On his own, his spirit would have failed at the thought of the hundreds of unprotected miles between him and the safety of the Twin Peaks ranch, where he could shelter behind a brother more adapted to these times. But what he had learned and worked at, drove him — the importance of this knowledge that must be saved for the future. All around the world now there would be forty, perhaps as many as sixty, men and women — psychobiological mathematicians like himself — who would have come independently to the same conclusion as he had. For a second the symbols of his math danced in order in his mind's eye, spelling out the inarguable truth about the human race in this spring of dissolution and disaster.

Like him, the others would have come to the conclusion that the knowledge of pb patterns must be protected, taken someplace safe and hidden against the time—five hundred years, two thousand years from now — when the majority of the race would begin to change back again toward civilized patterns. Only if all those understanding pb math tried their best, would there be even a chance of one of them succeeding in saving this great new tool for the next upswing of mankind. It was a knowledge that could read both the present and the future. Because of it, they who had worked with it knew how vital it was that it must not be lost. Only — the very civilized intellectual nature of their own individual patterns made them nonsurvival types in the world that had now created itself around them. It was bitter to know that they were the weakest, not the strongest, vessels to preserve what they alone knew must be preserved.

But they could try. He could try. Perhaps he could come to some terms with this time of savagery. It was ironic, after all the promises of world-wide nuclear destruction and such, that the world had actually died with a whimper, after all.

No — he corrected himself — not with a whimper. A snarl. It had begun with a universal economic breakdown, complemented by overpopulation, overcrowding, overpollution — of noise and idea as well as of waste and heat. A time of frustration, mounting to frenzy, with unemployment soaring, worldwide. Inflation soaring, worldwide. Strikes, crime, disease ...

— All the prosaic, predictable things, but reinforcing each other, had come to a head at once. And for a reason which had never been suspected, until the math of

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psychobiological patterns had been created — independently, but almost simultaneously, by people like Piotr Arazavin, Noshiobi Hideki ... and Jeeris Belany Walthar, yours truly ...

First there had come the large breakdowns — of the international economy, then of the national economy, then of local economies. Then, following economic systems into chaos, had gone the systems of world trade, of food production and other necessary supplies. Law and order had struggled for a while and gone down in the maelstrom. Cities became battlefields of the dead left by riot and revolution. Isolated communities developed into small, primitive, self-fortified territories. And the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were abroad once more.

It was a time of bloodletting, of a paring down of the population to those with the pb patterns for survival under fang-and-claw conditions. A new medievalism was upon the globe. The iron years had come again; and those who were best fitted to exist were those to whom ethics, conscience, and anything else beyond the pure pragmatism of physical power, were excess baggage.

And so it would continue, the pb mathematics calculated, until a new, young order could emerge once more, binding the little village-fortresses into alliances, the alliances into kingdoms, and the kingdoms into sovereign nations which could begin once more to treat with one another in systems. Five hundred years, two thousand years — however long that would take.

... And, meanwhile, a small anachronism of the time now dead, a weak individual of the soft centuries, struggled to cross the newly lawless country, carrying a precious child of the mind to where it might sleep in safety for as many centuries as necessary until reason and civilization should be born again —

Jeebee caught himself up at the brink of a bath in self-pity. Not that he was particularly ashamed of self-pity — or, at least, he did not think he was particularly ashamed of it. But emotional navel-contemplating of any kind withdrew his attention from his surroundings; and that could be dangerous. And, in fact, no sooner had he jerked himself out of his mood than his nostrils caught a faint but oily scent on the breeze.

In a moment he had killed the motor of the bike, was off it, and had dragged it with him into the cover of some nearby willow saplings. He lay there, making as little noise as possible and trying to identify what he had just smelled.

The fact that he could not

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identify it immediately did not make it less alarming. Any unusual phenomena — noise, odor, or other — were potential warnings of the presence of other humans. And if there were other humans around, Jeebee wanted to look them over at leisure before he gave them a chance to look at him.

In this case the scent was unidentifiable, but, he could swear, not totally unfamiliar. Somewhere he had encountered it before. After lying some minutes hidden in the willows with ears and eyes straining for additional information, Jeebee cautiously got to his feet and, pushing the bike without starting the motor, began to try to track down the wind-born odor to its source.

It was some little distance over two rises of land before the smell got noticeably stronger. But the moment came when, with the bike ten feet back, and lying on his stomach, he looked down a long slope at a milling mass of grey and black bodies. It was a large flock of Targhee sheep — the elusive memory of the smell of a sheep barn at a state fair twelve years before snapped back into his mind. With the flock below were three boys, riding bareback on small hairy ponies. No dogs were in view.

The thought of dogs sent a twinge of alarm along the nerves of Jeebee. He was about to crawl back to his bike and start moving away when a ram burst suddenly from the flock, with a sheep dog close behind it, a small brown-and-white collie breed that had been hidden by the milling dark backs and white faces about it. The sheep was headed directly up the slope where Jeebee lay hidden.

He lay holding his breath until the dog, nipping at the heels of the ram, turned it back into the mass of the flock. He breathed out in relief; but at that moment the dog, having seen the ram safely back among the other sheep, spun about and faced up in Jeebee's direction, nose testing the wind.

The wind was from dog to Jeebee. There was no way the animal could smell him, he told himself; and yet the canine nose continued to test the air. After a second the dog began to bark, looking straight in the direction of where Jeebee lay hidden.

"What's it, Snappy?" cried one of the boys on horseback. He wheeled his mount around and cantered toward the dog, up the pitch of the slope.

Jeebee panicked. On hands and knees he scrambled backward, hearing a sudden high-pitched whoop from below as he became visible on the skyline, followed by the abrupt pounding of horses hooves in a gallop.

"Get him — *get 'm!*" sang a

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voice. A rifle cracked. Knowing he was now fully in view, Jeebee leaped frantically on the trail bike and kicked down on its starter. Mercifully, it started immediately, and he roared off without looking backward, paying no attention to the direction of his going except that it was away from those behind him and along a route as free of bumps and obstacles as he could find.

The rifle cracked again. He heard several voices now, yelping with excitement and the pleasure of the chase. There was a whistling near his head as a bullet passed close. The little trail bike was slow to build up speed, and the sound of its motor washed out the galloping beat of the hoses' hooves behind him. But he was headed downslope, and slowly the bounding, oscillating needle of the speedometer was picking up space above the zero miles-per-hour pin.

The rifle sounded again, somewhat further behind him; and this time he heard no whistle of a passing slug. The shots had been infrequent enough to indicate that only one of the boys was armed; and the rifle used was probably a single shot, needing to be reloaded after firing — not an easy thing to do on the back of a galloping horse with no saddle leather or stirrups to cling to. He risked a glance over his shoulder.

The three had already given up the chase. He saw them on the crest of a rise behind him, sitting their horses, watching. They had given up almost too easily, he thought — and then he remembered the sheep. They would not want to go too far from the flock for which they were responsible.

He continued on, throttling back only a little on his speed. Now that they had seen him, he was anxious to get as far out of their area as possible, before they should pass the word to more adult riders on better horses and armed with better weapons. But he did begin, instinctively, to pay a little more attention to the dangers of rocks and holes in his way.

There was a new, gnawing uneasiness inside him. Dogs meant trouble for him — as one had just demonstrated. Other humans he could watch for and slip by unseen, but dogs had noses and ears to sense him in darkness or behind cover. And sheepherders meant dogs — lots of them. He had never expected to run into sheep this far east. According to his calculations — he had lost his only map some days ago — he should be no further west than barely into Nebraska or the Dakotas, by now.

A sudden, desperate loneliness swept over him. He was an outcast, and there was no one and no hope of anyone, to stand by him. If he

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had even one companion to make this long hazardous journey with him, there might be a real chance of his reaching the Twin Peaks. As it was, what he feared most deeply was that in one of these moments of despair he would simply give up, would stop and turn, to wait to be shot down by the armed riders following him; or he would walk nakedly into some camp or town to be killed and robbed — just to get it all over with.

Now he fought the feeling of loneliness, the despair, forcing himself to think constructively. What was the best thing for him to do under the circumstances? He would be safer apart from the trail bike, but without it he would not cover ground anywhere near so swiftly. With luck, using the bike, he could be out of this sheep area in a day or so. He had two five-gallon containers of gas strapped behind his saddle on the bike; that much fuel gave him a range of nearly four hundred miles, even allowing for the roughest going. — Four hundred miles — it was like the thought of gold to a miser. The bike was too valuable to abandon. Yes, it would be better to push through and simply hope to outrun trouble, as he just had, if he encountered any more of it.

He could, of course, hide out somewhere during the days and travel nights only; but travel at night was more dangerous. Even with a good moon he would have trouble spotting all the rocks and potholes in the path of the bike. No, the best plan was to make as much time as he could while the day lasted. When night came, he would decide then whether to ride on ...

Thinking this, he topped the small rise he had been climbing and looked down at a river, a good two hundred yards across, flowing swiftly from south to north across his direct path west.

Jeebee stared at the river in dismay. Then, carefully, he rode down the slope before him until he halted the bike at the very edge of the swiftly flowing water.

It was a stream clearly swollen by the spring runoff. It was dangerously full of floating debris and swift of current. He got off the bike and squatted to dip a hand in its waters. They numbed his fingers with a temperature like that of freshly melted snow. He got to his feet and remounted the bike, shaking his head. Calm water, warm water, he could have risked swimming, pushing the bike and his other possessions ahead of him on a makeshift raft. But not a river like this.

He would have to go up or down stream until he could find some bridge on which to cross it. Which way? He looked to right and to left.

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To right was downstream; and downstream, traditionally, led to civilization — which in this case meant habitation and possible enemies. He turned the bike upstream and rode off.

Luckily, the land alongside the river here was flat and open. He made good time, cutting across sections where the river looped back on itself and saving as much time as possible. Almost without warning he came around a bend and upon a bridge, straight and high above the grey, swift waters.

It was a railroad bridge.

For a second time he felt dismay; a purely conditioned reflex out of a civilized time when it was dangerous to try to cross a railway bridge for fear of being caught halfway over by traffic on the rails. Then that outworn feeling passed, and his heart and hopes leaped up together. For his purposes a railway bridge was the best thing he could have encountered.

There would be no traffic on these rails. And for something like the light trail bike he rode, the right-of-way beside the track should be almost as good as a superhighway. He rode the bike up the embankment, stopped to lift it onto the ties between the rails, and remounted. A brief bumpy ride took him safely over the river that moments before had been an uncrossable barrier.

On the far side of the river, as he had expected, there was plenty of room beyond the ends of the ties, on either side, for him to ride the bike. He lifted the machine off the ties to the gravel and took up his journey. The embankment top was pitted at intervals where rain had washed some of the top surfacing down the slope and away, but for the most part it was like traveling a well-kept dirt road, and he made steady time with the throttle nearly wide open.

There was another advantage to traveling along the railroad right-of-way that he had not thought of until he found himself doing it. This was that the embankment lifted him above the surrounding country and he could keep a good watch ahead for possible dangers. He was now past the rolling landscape he had been passing through earlier. Now, on either side of the track, the land was flat to the horizon, except in the far distance ahead, where the track curved out of sight among some low hills. And nowhere in view were there any sheep, or in fact any sign of man or beast.

For a rare moment he relaxed and let himself hope. Anywhere west of the Mississippi, across the prairie country, a railroad line could run for miles without intersecting any human habitation. With luck, he could be out of this

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sheep country before he knew it. Farther west, Martin had written in the last letters Jeebee had gotten from his brother, the isolated ranchers of the cattle country had been less affected than most by the breakdown of the machinery of civilization, and law and order, after a fashion, still existed. He could trade off the loot he had picked up from the cellar in comparative safety for the things he needed.

First of these was a more effective rifle than the .22. The .22 was a good little gun, but it lacked punch. Its slug was too light to have the sort of impact that would stop a charging man, or large beast. And there were still wolf, bear, and even an occasional mountain lion in the territory to which he was headed — to say nothing of wild range cattle, which could be dangerous enough.

Moreover, with a heavier gun he could bring down such cattle, or even deer or mountain sheep — if he was lucky enough to stumble across them — to supplement whatever other food supplies he was carrying. Which brought him to his second greatest need, the proper type of food supplies. Canned goods were very convenient, but they were heavy and impractical to carry by packsack. What he really needed was some freeze-dried meat. Or, failing that, some powdered soups, plain flour, dried beans, or such, and possibly bacon.

He had a packsack full of the best of that sort of supplies when he had finally tried to make his escape alive from Abbotsville. In fact, when he had packed it he had not really believed that the locals would not just let him go, that they really intended to kill him. In spite of the previous three months of near-isolation in the community, he had still felt that after five years of living there, he was one of them.

But of course, he had never been one of them. What had led him to think he knew them was their casual politeness in the supermarket or the post office, plus the real friendship he had had with his housekeeper, Ardyce Prine. Mrs. Prine had lived there all her life; and, in her sixties, was in a position of belonging to the local authoritative generation. But when the riots became too dangerous for him to risk traveling into Detroit to the think-tank at the university, the local Abbotsville folks must have begun to consider that they were stuck with him. And there was no real place for him in their lives, particularly as those lives began to shift toward an inward-looking economy, with local produce and meat being traded for locally made shoes and clothing. Jeebee produced nothing they needed. While Ardyce was still his housekeeper, they tolerated him; but the day

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came when she did not — only a short stiff note was delivered by her grandson, saying that she could no longer work for him.

After that, he had felt the invisible enmity of his neighbors beginning to hem him in. When he did try to leave and head west to Twin Peaks, he found they had been lying in wait with guns for him, for some time. At the moment of his leaving he had not been able to understand why. But he knew now. If he had tried to leave naked, they might have let him go. But even the clothes he wore they regarded as Abbotsville property with which he was running off, like a thief in the night. Bule Mannerly, the druggist, had risen like a demon out of the darkness of the hillside, shotgun in hand, to bar his going — and only that lucky misshot from somewhere in the surrounding darkness had let Jeebee get away.

But then, once away, he had foolishly gone through the supplies he carried like a spendthrift, never dreaming that it would be as difficult as it turned out to be to replace them with anything eatable at all, let alone more of their special and expensive kind.

But he had learned his lesson, now, three months later. At least half of him had become bearded and wise and animal-wary — ears pricked, eyes moving all the time, nose sensitive to sound, sight, or smell that might mean danger ...

He fell to dreaming of the things he would want to trade for as soon as he found someplace where it was safe to do so. In addition to a heavier rifle, he badly needed a spare pair of boots. The ones he wore would not last him all the way to Montana, if the bike broke down or he had to abandon or trade it off for any reason. Also, a revolver and ammunition for it would be invaluable — but of course to dream of a handgun like that was like dreaming of a slice of heaven. Weapons were the last thing anyone was likely to trade off, these days.

He became so involved in his own thoughts that he found himself entering the low line of further hills before he was really aware of it. The railroad track curved off between two heavy, grassy shoulders of land and disappeared in the shadow of a clump of cottonwood trees that lay at the far end of their curve. He followed the tracks around, chugged into the shadow of the cottonwoods and out the other side — to find himself in a small valley, looking down at a railroad station, some sheep-loading pens and a cluster of buildings, all less than half a mile away.

As it had when he had smelled the sheep, reflex led him to kill the

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motor of the bike and seek the ground beside the track with it and himself alike, all in one unthinking motion. He lay where he was on the rough stones of the track ballast, staring through a screen of tall, dry grass at the buildings.

Even as he lay there, he knew his hitting the ground like this had almost certainly been a futile effort. If there was anyone in the little community ahead, they must have heard the motor of his trail bike even before it came into view from under the trees. He continued to lie there; but there was no sign of movement in or around the small village, or whatever he was observing, although the tin chimneys on several of the buildings were sending up thin banners of grey smoke against the blue sky.

Overall, what he was observing, ahead and below, looked like a sheep-loading station that had grown into a semicommunity. There were two buildings down there that might be stores, but the majority of the structures he saw — frame buildings sided with grey unpainted boards, could be anything from home to warehouse.

He rolled half over on his side and twisted his body about to get at his packsack and take out a pair of binoculars. They were actually toy binoculars, a pair he had brought for Martin's youngest son, a five-year-old. They were all he had been able to get his hands on before leaving Abbotsville, and they were something that in ordinary times he would not have bothered to put in his pack. But they did magnify several times, although the material of their lenses was hardly of a higher grade than window glass.

He put the binoculars to his eyes and squinted at the buildings through the eyepieces. This time, after a long and painful survey, he did discover one dog, apparently asleep beside the three wooden steps leading up to the one long, widowed building he had guessed might be a store. He stared at the dog for a long time, but it did not move.

Jeebee held the glasses to his eyes until they began to water. Then he lowered the glasses, took his weight off his elbows, which had been badly punished, even through the leather jacket, by the gravel and stones beneath him, and tried to conjecture what he had stumbled upon.

It was, of course, possible — the wild wishful supposition came sliding into his head unbidden — that he had stumbled across some community where disease or some other reason had destroyed the population — including the dogs. In which case, all he had to do was step down there and help himself to whatever property might be lying around.

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The ridiculousness of such an impossible streak of good fortune coming his way was a proper antidote to the fanciful notion itself. But certainly, the buildings seemed, if not deserted, almost too quiet to be true. Of course, it was the middle of the day; and if this was stockmen's country, most of the people in it could be out tending or guarding sheep...

Even that was a far-fetched notion. No matter how many might go out, no one in these days would leave this many buildings, with whatever they might contain, unprotected from possible looters. No, there must be people below — they were simply inside the buildings and out of sight.

At once the answer burst on Jeebee's mind, and he glanced at his watch. Of course. It was noon. Anyone around below and ahead of him would be eating a midday meal.

He lay and waited. Within about twenty minutes the door outside which the dog lay opened, and the first of several figures came out. With the first one the dog was on his feet, in what — as far as Jeebee could tell from this distance — was a friendly greeting. The dog stayed alert, and one by one, half a dozen people emerged, to scatter out and disappear within other buildings. All seemed to be male and adult. Shortly after the last one had disappeared, the door opened again and a figure in skirts emerged, threw something to the dog, and went back inside. The dog lay down to chew on whatever it had been given.

Jeebee lay where he was, thinking. He could hold his position until night and then push the bike around the station and continue on down the track beyond at some safe distance. While he was still thinking this, the whanging of a one-cylinder engine burst distantly to life, and a moment later a motorized railcar rolled into sight on the track beyond the buildings. It continued up the track, away from him and the station until it was lost to sound and sight.

Jeebee chilled where he lay, looking after it. A car like that could get its speed up to sixty miles an hour along good railway track. It could run down his motorcycle with no trouble at all. He had just been fortunate that it had not headed toward him, instead of in the other direction. Of course, he could have gotten off the embankment and into the ditch, among the tall weeds before he could have been spotted. But all the same...

Suddenly, he had made up his mind. There had to be an end to guessing, sometime. Somewhere he would have to take a chance on trying to trade, and this place looked as good as any. He got back

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on the trail bike and kicked its motor to life.

Openly and noisily he rode down the track and in among the buildings.

There was a clamor of barking as he entered. A near dozen dogs of diverse breeds, but all of sheep dog type, gathered around him as he rode the bike directly to the steps where he had seen the original dog and where all the people had emerged. The original dog was one of those now following him clamorously. Like the others, it crowded close but made no serious attempt to bite, which was — he thought — a good sign as far as the attitudes toward strangers of those owning the dogs were concerned.

He stopped the bike, got off, and with the .22 in hand, packsack on back, he climbed the three steps to the door. He knocked. There was no answer.

After a second he knocked again; and when there was still no answer, put his hand on the knob. It turned easily and the door opened. He went in, leaving the yelping of the station dog pack behind him. Their noise did not stop once he had disappeared from their view, but it was muted by the walls and windows of the building.

Jeebee looked around himself at the room into which he had stepped. It was fair-sized, with six round tables and four chairs apiece that all dated back to before the breakdown. Along one wall was a short, high bar, but with nothing but some glasses upside down on the shelves behind it. Beyond the bar was a further door, closed, which Jeebee assumed to lead deeper into the building. Stacked on one end of the bar were some dishes, cups, and silverware looking as if they had just been left behind by diners, the figures Jeebe had seen coming out of this building a small while since as he lay and watched from the embankment.

The clamor of the dogs outside suddenly increased in volume, then unaccountably faded away into whimpers and silence. Jeebee moved swiftly to the window and looked out.

Coming toward the steps leading to the building's entrance was a strange female figure. A woman who must have been as large as Jeebee himself, but dressed in a muffling nineteenth-century dress of rusty black cloth that fell to the tops of her heavy boots below and ended in a literal poke bonnet at the top. She walked with long and heavy strides, one hand holding a short chain leash. But the leash seemed unnecessary. It dropped slackly from its connection with the leather collar of the large dog pacing beside her, as if it was trained to heel.

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It was this dog which had caused the rest of the pack to fall silent. It was no sheep dog, but a German shepherd half again as large as any of the other canines around it, its coat rough with the thick hair of a dog which had spent most of its winter out in the weather. Its collar was heavy and studded with bright metallic points, which, as it came closer, Jeebe made out to be sharp-pointed spikes.

It paid no attention to the other dogs at all. It ignored them as if they did not exist, walking by the side of the big woman with no sign of body or tail to show any sign other than that it was on some purposeful errand. The other dogs had drawn back from it, had sat down or lain down, and were now silent, licking their jaws with wet uneasy tongues. Woman and dog came up the steps, opened the door and stepped into the room where Jeebee waited. As the woman closed the door behind her, the barking outside made a halfhearted attempt to start again, then dwindled into silence.

"Heard you on your way in here," said the woman to Jeebee in a hoarse deep voice like the voice of a very old person. "I just stepped out to get my watchdog, here."

Jeebee felt the metal of the trigger guard of the .22 slippery in his right hand. The woman, he saw now that she was close, was wearing a black leather belt tight around her waist, with a small holster and the butt of what looked like a short-barreled revolver sticking out of the holster. He did not doubt that she could use it. He did not doubt that the dog would attack if she gave it the order. And, flooding all through him, was the old doubt that he could lift the .22 and fire, even to defend his own life.

"Sit," said the woman to the huge dog. "Guard."

The German shepherd sat down before the outer door. His black nose pointed and twitched in Jeebee's direction for a second, but that was all the reaction he showed. The woman lifted her head, looking directly at Jeebee. Her face was tanned, masculine-looking, with heavy bones and thin lips. Deep parentheses of lines cut their curves from nose to chin on each side of her mouth. She must be, Jeebee thought, at least fifty.

"All right," said the woman. "What brings you to town?"

"I came in to trade some things," said Jeebee.

His own voice sounded strange in his ears, like the creaky tones of an old-fashioned phonograph record where most of the low range had been lost in recording.

"What you got?"

"Different things," said Jeebee. "How about you? Have you or

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somebody else here got shoes, food, and maybe some other things you can trade me?"

His voice was sounding more normal now. He had pulled his cap low over his eyes before he had come into town; and hopefully, in this interior dimness, lit only by the windows to his right, she could not see the pale innocence of his eyes and forehead.

"I can trade you what you want — prob'ly," the woman said. "Come on. — You, too."

The last words were addressed to the dog. It rose silently to four feet and padded after them. She led Jeebee to the further door and through it into another room that looked as if it might once have been a poor excuse for a hotel lobby. A corridor led off from a far wall, and doors could be glimpsed on either side along it.

The lobby room was equipped with what had probably been a clerk's counter. This, plus half a dozen more of the round tables, were piled with what at first glimpse appeared to be every kind of junk imaginable, from old tire casings to metal coffeepots that showed the dints and marks of long use. A second look showed Jeebee a rough order to things in the room. Clothing filled two of the tables, and all of the cooking utensils were heaped with the coffeepots on another.

"Guard," said the woman to the dog again, and once more it took a seated position before the closed door by which they had all just entered.

"Let's see what you got," said the woman. She motioned to an end of the clerk's counter that was clear. Jeebee unbuckled his recently acquired leather jacket — the dog's nose tested the air again — and began unloading his belt of the screwdrivers, chisels, files, and other small hand tools he had brought. When he was done, he unwrapped the metal chain from his waist and laid it on the wooden surface of the counter where it chinked heavily.

"Maybe you can use this," said Jeebee, nodding at the dog as casually as possible.

"Maybe," said the woman, with a perfect flatness of voice. "But he don't need much holding. He works to orders."

"Sheep dog?" asked Jeebee, as she began to examine the tools.

She looked up squarely into his face.

"You know better than that," she said. "He's no stock dog. He's a killer." She stared at him for a second. "Or, do you know? What are you — cattleman?"

"Not me," said Jeebee. "My brother is. I'm on my way to his place, now."

"Where?" she asked, bluntly.

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"West," he said. "You probably wouldn't know him." He met her eyes. It was a time to claim as much as he could. "But he's got a good-sized ranch, he's out there — and he's waiting for me to show up."

The last, lying part came out with what Jeebee felt sounded like conviction. Perhaps a little of the truth preceeding it had carried over. The woman, however, looked at him without any change of expression whatsoever, then bent to her examination of the hand tools again.

"What made you think I was a cattleman?" Jeebee asked. Her silence was unnerving. Something in him wanted to keep her talking, as if, so long as she continued to speak, nothing much could go wrong.

"Cattleman's jacket," she said, not looking up.

"Ja —" he stopped himself. Of course, she was talking about the leather jacket he was wearing. He had not realized that there would be any perceptible difference in clothing between sheep and cattle men. Didn't sheepmen wear leather jackets, too? Evidently not — or at least, not in the same style.

"This is sheep country," the woman said, still not looking up. Jeebee felt the statement like a gun hanging in the air, aimed at him and ready to go off at any minute.

"That so?" he said.

"Yes, that's so," she answered. "No cattlemen left here, now. *That* was a cattle dog." She jerked her thumb at the guard dog, swept the tools and the chain together into a pile before her as if she already owned them. "All right, what you want?"

"A pair of good boots," he said. "Some bacon, beans, or flour. A handgun — a revolver."

She looked up at him on the last words.

"Revolver," she said with contempt. She shoved the pile of tools and chain toward him. "You better move on."

"All right," he said. "Didn't hurt to ask, did it?"

"Revolver!" she said again, deep in her throat, as if she was getting ready to spit. "I'll give you ten pounds of parched corn and five pounds of mutton fat. And you can look for a pair of boots on the table over there. That's it."

"Now, wait..." he said. The miles he had come since Abbotsville had not left him completely uneducated to the times he now lived in. "Don't talk like that. You know — I know — those tools there are worth a lot more than that. You can't get metal stuff like that any more. You want to cheat me some, that's all right. But let's talk a little more sense."

"No talk," she said. She came

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around the counter and faced him. Jeebee could feel her gaze searching in under the shadow of his cap's visor to see his weakness and his vulnerability. "Who else you going to trade with?"

She stared at him. Suddenly the great wave of loneliness, of weariness, washed through Jeebee again. The thinking front of his mind recognized that her words were only the first step in a bargaining. Now it was time for him to counteroffer, to sneer at what she had, to rave and protest — but he could not. Emotionally he was too isolated, too empty inside. Silently he began to sweep the chain and the hand tools into a pile and return them to his belt.

"What you doing?" yelled the woman, suddenly.

He stopped and looked at her.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll take them someplace else."

Even as he said the words, he wondered if she would call the dog and whether he would, indeed, make it out of this station alive.

"Someplace else?" she snarled. "Didn't I just say there isn't anyplace else anywhere near? What's wrong with you? — You never traded before?"

He stopped putting the tools back in his belt and looked at her.

"Look!" she said, reaching under the counter. "You wanted to trade for a revolver. Look at it!"

He reached out and picked up the nickel-plated short-muzzled weapon she had dumped before him. It was speckled with rust, and when he pulled the hammer back, there was a thick accumulation of dirt to be seen on its lower part. Even at its best, it had been somebody's cheap Saturday night special, worth fifteen or twenty dollars. Jeebee did not really know guns, but it was plain what he was being offered.

His head cleared, suddenly. If she really wanted to trade, there was hope after all.

"No," he said, shoving the cheap and dirty revolver back at her. "Let's skip the nonsense. I'll give you all of this for a rifle. A deer rifle — something about .30 caliber, and ammunition. Skip the food, the boots and the rest."

"Throw in that motorcycle," she said.

He laughed. And he was as shocked to hear himself as if he had heard a corpse laugh.

"You know better than that," he said. he waved his hand at the pile on the counter. "All right, you can make new hand tools out of a leaf from old auto springs — if you want to sweat like hell. But there's one thing you can't make, and that's chain like that. That chain's worth a lot. Particularly to somebody like you with stuff to protect. And if this is sheep

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country, you're not short of guns. Show me a .30-06 and half a dozen boxes of shells for it."

"Two boxes!" she spat.

"Two boxes and five sticks of dynamite." Jeebee's head was whirling with the success of his bargaining.

"I got no dynamite. Only damn fools keep that stuff around."

"Six boxes, then."

"Three."

"Five," he said.

"Three." She straightened up behind the counter. "That's it. Shall I get the rifle?"

"Get it," he said.

She turned and went down the corridor to the second door on the left. There was the grating sound of a key in a lock, and she went inside. A moment later she re-emerged, relocked the door, and brought him a rifle with two boxes of shells, all of which she laid on the counter.

Jeebee picked up the gun eagerly and went through the motions of examining it. The truth of the matter was that he was not even sure if what he was holding was a .30-06. But he had lived with the .22 long enough to know where to look for signs of wear and dirt in a rifle. What he had seemed clean, recently oiled and in good shape.

"You look that over, mister," said the woman. "I got another one you might like better, but it's not here. I'll go get it."

She turned and went toward the door.

"Guard!" she said to the dog, and it came to all four feet, its eyes fixed on Jeebee. She passed through the door, closing it behind her.

Jeebee stood motionless, listening until he heard the distant sound of the outside door slamming re-echo through the building. Then, moving slowly so as not to trigger off any reflex in the dog, he slid his hand to one of the boxes of cartridges the woman had brought, opened it with the fingers of one hand and extracted two of the shells. He laid one on the counter and slowly fed the other into the clip slot of the rifle. He hesitated, but the dog had not moved. With one swift move, he jacked the round into firing position ...

— Or tried to. The firing chamber would not close. Manually, he pulled back its cover and swore silently. The woman had outthought him, even in this. The shells she had brought him were of the wrong caliber for this particular rifle. The shell he had just put in was too big to more than barely nose itself into firing position.

Slowly, he took the shell out and laid the gun down on the counter. The proper size ammunition, of course, would be in that room down the corridor, but his chances of getting there...

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On the other hand, he might as well try. He took a step away from the counter toward the corridor.

Immediately the dog moved. It took one step forward toward him. He stared at it. It stood like a statue, its tail unmoving, no sound or sign of anger showing in it, but neither any sign of a relaxation of its watchfulness. It was the picture of a professional on duty. Of course, he thought, of course it would never let him reach the door of the room with the guns, let alone smash the door lock and break in. He stared at the dog. It must weigh close to a hundred and fifty pounds, and it was a flesh-and-blood engine of destruction. Some years back he had seen video film of such dogs being trained —

The distant sound of voices, barely above the range of audibility, attracted his attention. They were coming from outside the building.

He took a step toward the windows. This moved him also toward the dog, and at this first step the animal did not move. But when he stepped again, the dog moved toward him. It did not growl or threaten, but in its furry skull its eyes shone like bits of china, opaque and without feeling.

But his movement had brought him far enough out in the room so that he could look at an angle through the windows and glimpse the area in front of the building where the three steps stood to the entrance door. The woman stood there, now surrounded by five men, all with rifles or shotguns. As he stood, straining his ears in the hot, silent room, the sense of their words came faintly to him through the intervening glass and distance.

"...Where y'been?" the woman was raging. "He was ready to walk out on me. I want two of you to go around back—"

"Now, you wait," one of the men interrupted her. "He's got that little rifle. No one's getting no .22 through him just because you want his bike."

"Did I say I wanted it for myself?" demanded the woman. "The whole station can use it. Isn't it worth that?"

"Not getting shot for, it ain't," said the man who had spoken. "Sic your dog on him."

"And get the dog shot!" shouted the woman, hoarsely, deeply.

"Why not?" said one of the other men. "It's no damn good, that dog. Killed four good sheep dogs already, and nobody dare go close to it. For that matter, it don't do what you want, so easy. You should have shot it yourself, back when we pulled down Callahan's place."

"That's a valuable dog! Like this's a valuable machine!" The

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woman waved at the motorcycle. "You got to take some risks to make a profit."

"You go in and send him out here!" said one of the men, stubbornly. "You send him out not suspecting anything and give us a chance to shoot him with some safe."

"If'n he comes out," said the woman. "He's going to want to come out traded, with a loaded carbine instead of that .22. You want to face that, damn you? You going to argy with me? I done my share of facing him. Now it's up to you all —"

The argument went on. The loneliness and emptiness crested inside Jeebee. He sank down into a sitting position on the boards of the floor, dropping the .22 across his knees and covering his face with his hands. Let them come. Let it be over...

But he sat there as the seconds ticked away, and he found that he was not quite ready to die yet. He lifted his head and saw the muzzle of the dog staring eye-to-eye with him — not six inches between their faces.

For a moment the dog stood there, then it extended its neck, and sniffed at him. Its black nose began to move over his upper body, sniff by sniff exploring the jacket; and a sudden wild hope stireed in Jeebee. Casually, he closed his hands on the rifle still in his lap and with his left hand tilted its muzzle toward the head of the dog above it as his left hand felt for the trigger. At this close range, even a small slug like this right through the brain of the dog...

His finger found the trigger and trembled there. The dog paid no attention. His nose was pushed in the unbuttoned opening at the top of the jacket, sniffing. Abruptly he withdrew his head and looked squarely into Jeebee's eyes.

In that moment Jeebee knew that he could not do it. Not like this. He could not even kill this dog. His buck fever was back on him ... and what did it matter? Even if he killed the animal, the men outside would kill him eventually. And what kind of a fool guard dog was it, that would let him put a gun directly to its head and pull the trigger?

"Get away!" he snarled at it, slamming it with his fist on the side of the head.

The head rocked away from him with the blow. But it turned back; the china eyes looked undecipherably into his; and the head dropped, dropped ... until a rough red tongue rasped on the back of the hand with which he had struck.

He stared at the door. Then, almost before he had time to think, habit and instinct — his whole

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out-of-date pattern moved him unthinkingly. He reached out and gently soothed the thick fur of the bowed neck.

"Sorry, boy. Sorry..." he whispered.

The big dog leaned its weight against him, almost tumbling him over backward. But even now it did not wag its tail in ordinary canine fashion. The tail moved horizontally, tentatively and slightly, and then went back to being still. The great jaws caught Jeebee's stroking hand by the wrist and chewed gently and lovingly upon it. The eyes looked directly into Jeebee's again; and now they were no longer opaque china, but glass windows opening on long twin tunnels down to where a savage single-purpose fire burned.

Like the waters from a bursting dam, the offering of affection from the animal exploded into Jeebee's arid soul. Like water to a parched throat, it was almost painful in its first touch — and then Jeebee found himself with both arms around the neck of the big dog, hugging the beast to him.

But, even as he blossomed interiorly, Jeebee's mind began its working. It was the jacket, of course, his mind told him. The jacket, and the dog alike, must have come from the ruined house where he had found the chain and taken shelter that night. The jacket must still smell of the cattleman who had owned the dog originally, and several days of wearing the leather garment had mingled its original owner's scent with Jeebee's until they were one scent only. Also, above all, the jacket and Jeebee both would not smell of sheep and sheep handling, of which all this station, its people and buildings, must reek to the dog's sensitive nose.

Nonetheless, what had happened was a miracle. He could not get over that. He almost cried and laughed at once, sitting on the floor with his arms around the dog, dodging the wet tongue searching for his face. He should have remembered, he told himself, that back when the years had been of iron there had been miracles, as well. And both had come to life again.

That thought reminded of him of the danger in which he still stood. He scrambled to his feet and ran to the locked door of the room the woman had entered, the dog close at his heels. A blow of the rifle butt of the .22 broke the cheap lock of the door handle, and the door itself swung open to show him a rack of rifles and shotguns — a hanging row of handguns.

He grabbed a revolver and the one rifle he recognized, a Weatherby Magnum 300, and found boxes of ammunition for both weapons

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among the many other such boxes filling a shelf along the far side of the small room. He loaded the Weatherby and the revolver and shoved the revolver into his belt, boxes of the two kinds of shells into his pockets. Then, with the big dog following, he ran out again into the corridor, toward its far end.

A little farther on, the corridor turned left at a ninety-degree angle and cut across the width of the building to a dead end, pierced by a window shielded by a glass curtain. Jeebee looked out the window and saw two men, with three of the station dogs, standing and waiting, watching.

Hidden behind the curtain, Jeebee smashed the glass of the window with the muzzle of the .22 and fired it steadily out of the broken window into the air until it was empty. Then he threw up the window and jumped out.

The two men outside, unhurt, were running away. They disappeared from sight around the far end of the building, the three dogs at their heels. Jeebee looked about, saw the loom of the hills over the roofs to his right, and ran that way between two buildings.

He loped between the buildings, suddenly remembering that half of his possessions were back on the bike and the bike was lost forever. A tingle of fear tried to be born in him, but was drowned in the adrenalin of the moment. This was no time to think of anything but getting away. He dodged from one alley between a pair of buildings to another and broke out at last beyond a final pair of the structures to see his way clear to the hills, with only a long slope of waist-high stunted-looking corn before him. Just emerging from the cornfield and headed toward the station, only fifty feet from him, was a man with a shotgun and a pair of dogs trotting ahead of him.

The man halted at the sight of Jeebee and lifted his shotgun uncertainly. The guard dog went past Jeebee in a silent rush toward the two smaller dogs. One of the two spun and bolted. The second stood its ground a second too long and went down with a howl that turned into a choked-off death yelp as the guard dog's jaws closed on its neck.

The man's shotgun, which had been lifting to aim at Jeebee, swung instead to point at the guard dog.

Jeebee dropped the .22 and jerked up the Weatherby. This time, without thinking, he fired to kill.

A few minutes later, hidden among the corn, he turned to look down through the stalks at the station. A number of figures milled around down there between the buildings and the edge of the planted field, but none of them

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were trying to follow.

He turned and headed away between two of the hills, keeping the corn as cover between himself and the station. He had lost the .22 in that last moment when he had shot the man coming out of the cornfield; half of his goods and bike were abandoned behind him. But the big dog pressed close against his leg as they both moved on, and Montana was a certain destination now. He was no longer alone. The world as it was, and he as he had become, had moved toward each other finally.

A strengthened vessel carried knowledge westward.

(*Films, from page 150*)

In all justice, I must point out one moment when the extreme bloodiness is not just inanely gratuitous. The creature destroys himself by opening his unhealed scars and ripping out his own organs. Difficult as this may be to watch, it has a terrible poetic justice which is right for the myth that Mary Shelley made.

A neighborhood theater had the bright idea of reviving *Barbarella*, and I enjoyed it twice as much as I did the first time around — in 1967, to be exact. Then it had an air of sophomoric determined-to-shock; given today's realistic horrors on the screen, it now has an almost naive sweetness. I was amazed at the moment of imaginative creativity that went into it; for no particularly concrete reason, it reminded me of Michael Morocock in its flow of fantastical ideas and settings. Jane Fonda is quite wonderful, also; as the futuristic dumb blonde raised in a galaxy of sweetness and light, and confronted with all sorts of wickedness, her determined Pollyanna brightness is excruciatingly funny. All in all, "Barbarella" deserves more of a reputation than it has. It's too bad that it will not hit TV for some time to come, due to the almost constant state of semi-nudity in which Ms. Fonda seems to find herself.

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OH, KEEN-EYED PEERER INTO THE FUTURE!

I do a lot of after-dinner speaking and also a lot of article-writing for the general magazines. In a substantial fraction of the work I get, I am asked to speak on one aspect or another of the future. I have spoken or written, in the not-too-distant past, on the future of such aspects of society as direct-mail advertising, the space effort, amusement parks, supermarkets, sterile disposable devices, and screw machines.

And what makes me such an expert on the future? What are my credentials?

I am a science fiction writer. Nothing more than that.

How respectable science fiction has grown! How almost awe-inspiring a science fiction writer has become merely by virtue of being a science fiction writer. And why? Upon what meat have these, our writers, fed that they are grown so great?

Mostly, it is the predictive aspect of science fiction that has brought about the change. We have been good at predicting.

This is something I have discussed before (FUTURE?

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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TENSE! June 1965), but that was nine years ago and I have done some thinking on the matter since. What I want to do now, therefore, on the occasion of the silver anniversary of F&SF, is to discuss the matter of prediction in sf more systematically (though with some overlap) and present for your consideration the Three Laws of Futurics.*

To begin with, I wish to deny that accurate prediction is the chief concern of the science fiction writer, or even an important minor concern. Nor should it be.

The science fiction writer is a *writer*, first and foremost, and his chief and overriding concern, if he is an honest practitioner of his craft, is to turn out a good story and bend everything else to that end. His second concern, since he is also a human being with human needs, is to write the kind of good story that will sell and help him earn an honest living.

If, in the process of writing a good story and earning an honest living, the science fiction writer also manages to make a prediction that eventually seems to come true, so much the better — but it remains a more or less accidental by-product of what he is doing.

And yet the accurate prediction takes place in science fiction far more often than one would expect from sheer chance. But why not? The science fiction writer, in working out his societies of the future, must base them, consciously or unconsciously, on the society of the present, and in doing so automatically evolves a rational way of going about it. In short, whether he knows it or not, he makes use of the Three Laws of Futurics.

Of these, the First Law of Futurics may be expressed as follows: "What is happening will continue to happen." Or, to express it in another fashion, "What has happened in the past will happen in the future." (If it occurs to you that this sounds very much like the old bromide "History repeats itself," you are right. My entire Foundation Trilogy was consciously guided by the First Law.)

To go into detail on how the First Law works, however, I will take two examples from my own stories: one (mentioned briefly in FUTURE? TENSE!) in which I deliberately violated the First Law, and one (not mentioned in the earlier article) in which I observed it.

First, the violation —

In the Spring of 1953, Mount Everest was much in the news. After

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**Everything has Three Laws: Motion, Thermodynamics, Robotics. Why not Futurics as well.*

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thirty years of trying, a seventh attempt to scale the mountain had failed.

Yet each successive attempt had learned from its predecessors, and each was making use of progressively more sophisticated equipment. By the First Law, we can assume that learning and sophistication would continue and that, therefore, Mount Everest would eventually be climbed.

To attempt to predict the exact day when it would be climbed, or the name of the climber or any of the other fine details, is, of course, not futurism but fortune-telling; and with fortune-telling the science fiction technique has nothing to do.

In the Spring of 1953, I wanted to write a little story about Mount Everest, and I could find nothing interesting in the First Law prediction that it would be successfully scaled. If it was, so what?

I wanted instead to set up some interesting condition that would cause the prediction *not* to come true. I wanted to find a story in something that was a deliberate violation of the First Law.

(This is not necessarily a bad thing to do. The First Law of Futurics, unlike the First Law of Thermodynamics, *can* be violated. Suppose I were writing a story in 1900 about a future that involves rocket travel. From the fact that man had learned to command steadily greater speeds over the past century, I might assume that First Law predicted that eventually man would achieve a speed of 500,000 kilometers per second. In order to compose an interesting story I would therefore violate the prediction by imagining some sort of cosmic speed limit at 300,000 kilometers per second. It would have been wonderful to do so, for in 1905, Einstein worked out just exactly such a speed limit and made it stick.)

I could invent a number of reasons to abort the inevitability of the scaling of Mount Everest. There would be a sheer, glassy precipice up the last five hundred feet into which picks could not gouge. There might be a mysterious force-field blocking off the peak. There might be a layer of poisonous gases six miles up in the air, one that touches ground level only at the peak of the highest mountain.

The aborting effect that I happened to choose was that the Abominable Snowmen really existed and that they were actually Martians who had established an observation post on Earth in order to keep an eye on our planet. Naturally, they saw to it that intruding Earthmen in mountaineering costume were either turned back or disposed of.

The story, named "Everest," was only 1000 words long and was sold on April 7, 1953 for $30.

You can be sure that I considered the presence of Martians on top of

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Mount Everest a just about zero-probability event and was certain that my "prediction" was a false one and that the mountain would be climbed. (Of course, I must admit that in 1900, I would have considered a cosmic speed limit a just-about zero-probability event, too.) Still, I was reasonably certain that the mountain would remain unscaled for a while, anyway, or at least until my story was published.

As it happened, I lost the gamble. At 11:30 A.M. on May 29, 1953, less than two months after my sale, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reached the topmost peak of Mount Everest and, needless to say, found neither Martians nor Abominable Snowmen. They had outdated my story before it was published.

Still, the publishers were not about to throw away thirty dollars (and, in those days, I was not about to return the money either), and the story was published anyway. It appeared in the December 1953 issue of *Universe Science Fiction*, which hit the stands in October. I was therefore in the position of having predicted that Mount Everest would never be climbed, five months *after* it had been climbed.

Not one of my more luminous accomplishments!

I had better luck with a much earlier story, "Trends," which had been written a month before my 19th birthday, and sold a month after my birthday. It appeared in the July, 1939 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*.

It dealt with the first flight around the Moon and back (no landing). I placed the first abortive attempt in 1973 and the second and successful one in 1978. Since the real thing took place, successfully, in 1968, you can see that I was a decade too conservative.

Naturally, at the age of not-quite-19, I knew nothing about rocket engineering, and my notions about what a first flight to the Moon would be like were ludicrously wrong in every respect. There was no government involvement, no military involvement. There were no computers, no mid-course corrections, no preliminary orbital flights, no docking maneuvers, no Russians.

Just to show you how far off I was, I realized dimly that the rocket ship could not be launched in New York City; so I had it launched elsewhere, at the edge of the known world, as I knew it. I had the ship launched across the Hudson River, near Jersey City.

Frankly, it was a terrible story, but no one complained at the time, and it has been anthologized five times (the fifth time in 1973). You see, all

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that stuff about rocket ships was not the point. The nub of the story was that there existed great resistance to space exploration on the part of a large fraction of the population. My rocket-ship inventor was beaten down by this resistance and was driven underground.

This was the first time, in any science fiction story, in which resistance to space exploration had even been pictured. Until then, science fiction writers either ignored public reaction to spaceflight or assumed it to be wildly enthusiastic — not only before "Trends," but after "Trends" as well. (To be sure, H. G. Wells had pictured a rocket ship being mobbed in one of his stories, but that was after a futuristic war, so that there was then good reason to hate and fear rocket ships. In my story, there was resistance to the very *notion* of space exploration).

What, then, made this not-quite-19-and-naive-for-his-age youngster see something that so many older and thicker heads did not see either before or after? I'll tell you —

I was going to Columbia University at the time, and you will not be thunderstruck to hear that I could not afford the tuition. So I scrounged money where I could, and for $15 a month, I worked for a sociology professor who was doing a book entitled "Social Resistance to Technological Change."

I had to gather and type the references for him, and in doing so, I discovered that there was embittered resistance to every single significant technological change that rippled the smooth current of human society — from the discovery of writing to the attempt to build a practical heavier-than-air flying machine.

At once I applied the First Law of Futurics and said to myself, "If that has always happened, it will continue to happen and there will be resistance to space exploration." And I wrote "Trends."

The real question is not why I saw this point, but why the rest of the world did not. The answer is embodied in the Second Law of Futurics which is, "Consider the obvious seriously, for few people will see it."

Surely, I don't have to elaborate on that point to a science fiction audience. It *is* obvious and *was* obvious and *has been* obvious for a long time that increasing population would produce overwhelming problems for mankind, yet most people have steadfastly looked the other way. It *is* obvious and *was* obvious and *has been* obvious for a long time that the oil resources of the world were sharply limited and that the result of allowing that limit to overtake us, unprepared, would be disastrous, yet most people steadfastly looked the other way.

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In fact, those, like myself, who kept persistently pointing out the obvious, were denounced as "doomcryers" and were shrugged off.

Yet such obvious items are not ignored by science fiction writers. Forced by the professional necessity of considering many possible futures, they apply the Second Law to the construction of dramatic stories — and out of the obvious they make themselves awe-inspiring keen-eyed peerers into the future.

The earliest overpopulation story I personally remember having read, and the one which first started me thinking about the inevitability of misery if our population policy continued unchanged was "Earth, the Marauder" by Arthur J. Burks, which ran in the July, August, and September, 1930 *Astounding Stories.*

The earliest end-of-fuel story I personally remember having read and which first started me thinking about the inevitability of misery if our fuel policy continued unchanged was "The Man who Awoke" by Laurence Manning in the March 1933 *Wonder Stories.*

We've been getting these warnings then, in science fiction, for forty years and more; and yet all our terribly clever statesmen and leaders continue to be caught by "population crises" and "energy crises" and to act as though such crises came out of the woodwork, unheralded, just two days before.

(And yet science fiction magazines were stigmatized as "silly escape literature" for decades. Some "escape!" We science fiction crackpots escaped into a world of overpopulation, oil shortage, and so on — and had the privilege of agonizing for forty years over matters on which all those practical men who read mainstream literature, are just beginning to focus.)

But let's go on. In applying the First Law of Futurics, we mustn't make the mistake of supposing that the "continue to happen" will form an absolutely smooth curve with no landmarks anywhere in it.

No, the curve is bumpy, and sometimes the bumps are sharp and unexpected ones.

There is no way of predicting when a bump will take place, or how sharp it will be, or what it's nature will be — there we are in fortune-telling again. However, it is important to watch carefully for such a bump and to take it into account in foretelling the future. And, as it happens, science fiction writers, who must devise new societies by the nature of their profession, are often better equipped to see and interpret those bumps than scientists (let alone laymen) are.

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In 1880, you might argue by First Law that since mankind was steadily increasing its ability to exploit the energy resources of Earth, it was inevitable that they eventually find some source as yet unknown in 1880 — but what it might be, you could not reasonably foretell.

In 1900, however, when nuclear energy had been discovered, First Law would make it clear that since technology was growing steadily more sophisticated, it would continue to do so and that nuclear energy would be bent to the practical needs of man.

H. G. Wells made this assumption at once and wrote stories of atomic bombs in 1902. Many honest and brilliant scientists — even Nobel laureates in physics — remained convinced right into the 1930s, however, that nuclear energy would never be tamed. It was in this particular spot that science fiction writers proved spectacularly more right than scientists, and it is why scientists today, having been embarrassed by this fact, are now more prone to use the First Law and be generous in their predictions.

Yet if scientists remained conservative on the subject of nuclear energy, it was because through the 1930s there seemed no clear route toward its taming. As late as 1933, Manning could write his story on fuel-exhaustion without considering the possibility of nuclear energy as a substitute.

However, in 1939, when uranium fission was announced, one physicist (Leo Szilard) saw the inevitability of a nuclear bomb at once, but so did a lot of science fiction writers (particularly John Campbell) since it was their business to see such things.

The result was that while the United States was working on a nuclear bomb in deep, deep secrecy, science fiction writers, all through World War II, wrote freely of nuclear bombs and their consequences. (I never did, by the way. I was busy writing my Foundation stories and my robot stories and I thought that nuclear bombs were old stuff and not worth wasting time on. Another one of my luminous accomplishments!)

Finally, Cleve Cartmill's "Deadline," which appeared in the March 1944 *Astounding Science Fiction,* roused American security officers. They interviewed John Campbell on the matter and found that nothing could be done about it. The extrapolation from uranium fission to the nuclear bomb was easy and inevitable (for science fiction writers), and any sudden stop to science-fiction stories on the subject would give the whole thing away and destroy all secrecy.

To repeat, it was the prediction of the nuclear bomb that most astonished the outside world, and that most contributed to the

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respectability of science fiction; and yet it was so easy a prediction that it deserves no admiration whatever. The outside world should have marvelled at its own stupidity rather than at our wisdom.

To achieve particularly important predictions it helps to make use of the Third Law of Futurics, which can most simply be stated as: "Consider the consequences." The prediction of a gadget is easy enough, but what will happen to society when such a gadget is established.

To quote a passage from my earlier article FUTURE? TENSE! "...the important prediction is not the automobile, but the parking problem; not radio, but the soap opera; not the income tax, but the expense account; not the bomb, but the nuclear stalemate."

(My esteemed and long-time friend, Frederik Pohl, paraphrased this passage from memory in an editorial in *Galaxy*, and, unable to remember where he had read it, or who had said it, had prefaced it with "A wise man once said —" When I promptly informed him where he read it and explained that he had inadvertently called his esteemed and long-time friend, Isaac Asimov, "a wise man," he was exceedingly chafed.)

The most marvellous example of detecting a consequence that utterly escaped all the great leaders of the world was in "Solution Unsatisfactory" by Anson Macdonald (Robert A. Heinlein) which appeared in the May 1941 *Astounding Science Fiction.* Heinlein predicted the Manhattan Project, and the development of a nuclear weapon that put an end to World War II. That was easy. But he also went on to predict the nuclear stalemate, which was exceedingly hard to do; since as far as I know, no one else did at the time.

The Third Law can, of course, be used for one of the important functions of science fiction — satire. You can consider the consequences and pick a low-probability one that you can make sound so logical as to throw a lurid light on man's folly. The aforementioned Frederik Pohl is very good at that and has written a number of stories designed to show the ridiculous — but logical — consequences that could be brought on by continuing present trends.

I myself have not generally indulged in satire, not being a satiric person by nature. I occasionally manage to do so, however. For instance I wrote a satiric article for a general-circulation magazine in which I attempted, in part, to deal with the problem of inflation with the Third Law in mind. Here are the consequences I pretended to favor —

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Consider inflation, for instance — There's a problem that has now become serious. Prices are going up in such a way that misery and suffering aren't confined to poor people who are used to it. Instead, well-to-do people like you and me are beginning to suffer, and that is both pitiful and unjust.

Finding a solution did, I admit, take me a little time, because I don't know anything about economicks (if that's how the word is spelled). Fortunately, I recently heard a Cleveland banker discussing some graphs which indicated trends over the next few years. Being a banker, he knew all about ekonomics.

He indicated an upward-sloping line (it meant something; either gross national product or women's hemlines, I'm not sure which) and said that the line was satisfactory but assumed 4 percent umemployment. "It would be even better," he said, "if we could have 5 percent unemployment, because that would keep inflation within bounds."

I experienced a blinding flash of illumination. Unemployment was the solution to inflation! The more people unemployed, the fewer people there would be with money. With less money to be thrown around foolishly, there would be just no point in raising prices, so inflation would be solved. I was very glad I had listened to that clever economist.

Now the problem is: How do we go about getting enough unemployed?

The trouble is that it's not a popular occupation and there are practically no volunteers. That's not surprising in view of the contempt with which the profession of unemployment is viewed. How many times have you said to a friend, "Why don't those bums get off welfare and find a job?" (Which is exactly what you don't want them to do, actually, if you are against inflation.)

But view the situation logically. You, with your haughty executive position and your large salary are contributing to inflation every day, while those poor souls with holes in their shoes, sipping at their wine bottles along skid row are fighting inflation with desperate intensity. How can you feel contempt for them, then? Which of you deserves more from society?

If we are to defeat inflation, we must recognize the unemployed as our front-line fighters in the battle against that scourge, and we must give them the recognition they should get.

We do so to a limited extent, to be sure. We pay them unemployment insurance and welfare: The pay isn't much; it can't be. If we pay the unemployed a lot, inflation takes over.

But if the pay must be little, must it be accompanied with such open

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disapproval? Money isn't everything, you know, and any unemployed person would find his pittance quite enough if only it were accompanied by the gratitude he so richly deserves.

What's wrong with greeting these hard-working and long-suffering soldiers of the front-line trenches in the war against inflation with a kindly word, a slap on the back. Let them know we're behind them and think highly of them — but, of course, you must not give them any money. It's essential not to give them money.

The government can help, too. Campaign ribbons for unemployment service can be handed out. The pewter cross with soup-spoon clusters can be awarded to those who are unemployed above and beyond the call of duty. The patriotism of certain minority groups who contribute more than their share to the struggle should be recognized. There should be recruiting posters: Uncle Sam wants YOU to quit your job.

Men and women would flock to the unemployment colors. The 5 percent mark would be attained easily; nay, exceeded, for Americans do not shirk their patriotic duty.

And inflation would be brought to a halt!

By way of the Third Law I suppose I am satirizing our economic system, or our callous attitude toward the unemployed; or our romanticizing of war. I'm not sure which, actually, for I only write; I don't analyze.

Whatever the object of the satire, however, it proved too strong. The general magazine, which accepted the article, asked me to remove this passage and substitute something else. Since it promptly occurred to me I could use the passage otherwise, as I just have, I agreed to do so.

The rejection of the passage is important. One of the difficulties in prediction, is that predicting the obvious is sometimes politically and socially dangerous. People don't want their comfort disturbed, or their prejudices ridiculed. They don't want to be told that they should sacrifice some of what they have for the poor today or for their own descendants tomorrow. They don't want to be laughed at for their folly. What they want to be told, above all is that "everything is all right and you don't have to worry."

And by and large that is exactly what they are told, so that no one can bring themselves to mention this or that potential discomfort till it has become too enormous and overpowering to be denied any longer.

But my passage on inflation *can* be published in a science fiction

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magazine, and so can anything else (provided it is written well enough) no matter how discomforting it may be to the comfortable, or how unpalatable to the social gourmet.

It is the very nature of science fiction to consider the discomforting if that is where the task of extrapolating social and scientific trends takes us; and the wonderful thing about the science fiction reader is that he will accept the discomfort and look it in the face.

If we could get the whole world to do that, there might be a chance for humanity yet.

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Cugel the Clever, the hero of several Jack Vance stories that appeared here in the mid-sixties, makes a welcome return in a rare new short story by the master of the exotic adventure tale.

The Seventeen Virgins

by JACK VANCE

Cugel, having made a hasty departure from Julle, found himself on foot in that dismal tract of rolling bone-colored hills known as the Pale Rugates. As he trudged south, up ridge, down swale, Cugel, never a stolid individual, was affected by a variety of emotions. To his elation, he had baffled his pursuers, but only by plunging recklessly into the wilderness, which was cause for a corresponding anxiety. Baleful creatures such as sindics, shambs, erbs and grues shunned the Pale Rugates, for which Cugel gave heartfelt thanks, but the reason for such avoidance was the stark inhospitability of the region. The breadth of the sky exalted his soul; the emptiness of the far distances caused him fatigue and despondency; and so it went.

For want of better entertainment Cugel gave expression to his emotions, alternating cries of anger for the indignities he had suffered at Julle with laughter for the confusion of his enemies. His immediate discomfort provoked him to curses; the prospect of even harsher conditions clamped at his throat and stifled his voice completely. During the first day or two, in spasms of self-assertion, he would throw his fists over his head and shout to the sky: "Hear me, all who detect sound, in every realm of the living world! I am Cugel, Cugel the Clever! My courage and resource, my cunning and craft are notorious! I am not to be trifled with!"

Such diversion presently lost its edge, and Cugel marched south in silence: up slope, out on the ridge, there to overlook a far succession of barren swells, pallid as parchment

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and given substance by the intervening shadows; down again into the hollow where at rare intervals a seep of water nourished a sickly vegetation.

Day followed day. The sun rose cool and dim, swam languidly up into the dark-blue sky, from time to time seeming to lurch, or tremble, or flicker with a film of blue-black luster, finally to settle like an enormous purple pearl behind the western horizon. In the marches Cugel found ramp and burdock and newts which provided him sustenance; by night he huddled into the bracken.

On the afternoon of the seventh day Cugel limped down a slope into an ancient orchard, long abandoned. A few withered hag-apples clung to the limbs; these Cugel avidly devoured. Then, discerning the trace of an old road, he set off buoyed by the conviction that the Pale Rugates lay behind him.

The track in due course led out upon a slope overlooking a broad plain. A river swung up to the outlying shoulders of the Pale Rugates, skirted a small town immediately below, then disappeared into the southwest haze.

Cugel surveyed the landscape with keen attention. Out upon the plain he saw carefully tended garden plots, each precisely square and of identical size; along the river drifted a fisherman's punt. A placid scene, thought Cugel. On the other hand, the town was built to a strange and archaic architecture, and the scrupulous precision with which the houses surrounded the square suggested a like inflexibility in the inhabitants. The houses themselves were no less uniform, each a construction of two, or three, or even four squat bulbs of diminishing size, one on the other, the lowest always painted blue, the second dark red, the third and fourth respectively a dull mustard ocher and black; and each house terminated in a spire of fancifully twisted iron rods, of greater or lesser height. An inn on the riverbank showed a style somewhat looser and easier, with a pleasant garden surrounding. Along the river road to the east Cugel now noticed the approach of a caravan of six high-wheeled wagons, and his uncertainty dissolved; the town was evidently tolerant of strangers, and Cugel confidently set off down the hill.

At the outskirts to town he halted and drew forth his purse which hung loose and limp. Cugel examined the contents: five terces, a sum hardly adequate to his needs. Cugel reflected a moment, then collected a handful of pebbles which he dropped into the purse, to create a reassuring rotundity. He dusted his breeches, adjusted his green hunter's cap, and proceeded.

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He entered the town without challenge or even attention. Crossing the square, he halted to inspect a contrivance even more peculiar than the quaint architecture: a stone fire pit in which several logs blazed high, rimmed by five lamps on iron stands, each with five wicks, and above an intricate linkage of mirrors and lenses, the purpose of which surpassed Cugel's comprehension. Two young men tended the device with diligence, trimming the twenty-five wicks, prodding the fire, adjusting screws and levers which in turn controlled the mirrors and lenses. They wore what appeared to be the local costume: voluminous blue knee-length breeches, red shirts, brass-buttoned black vests and broad-brimmed hats; after disinterested glances they paid Cugel no heed, and he continued to the inn.

In the adjacent garden two dozen folk of the town sat at tables, eating and drinking with great gusto. Cugel watched them a moment or two; their punctilio and elegant gestures suggested the manners of an age far past. Like their houses, they were a sort unique to Cugel's experience, pale and thin, with egg-shaped heads, long noses, dark expressive eyes and ears cropped in various styles. The men were uniformly bald and their pates glistened in the red sunlight. The women parted their black hair in the middle, then cut it abruptly short a half-inch above the ears, a style which Cugel considered unbecoming. Watching the folk eat and drink, Cugel was unfavorably reminded of the fare which had sustained him across the Pale Rugates, and he gave no further thought to his five terces. He strode into the garden and seated himself at a table. A portly man in a blue apron approached, frowning somewhat at Cugel's disheveled appearance. Cugel immediately brought forth two terces which he handed to the man. "This is for yourself, my good fellow, to insure expeditious service. I have just completed an arduous journey; I am famished with hunger. You may bring me a platter identical to that which the gentleman yonder is enjoying, together with a selection of side dishes and a bottle of wine. Then be so good as to ask the innkeeper to prepare me a comfortable chamber." Cugel carelessly brought forth his purse and dropped it upon the table where its weight produced an impressive implication. "I will also require a bath, fresh linen and a barber."

"I myself am Maier the innkeeper," said the portly man in a gracious voice. "I will see to your wishes immediately."

"Excellent," said Cugel. "I am impressed with your establishment, and will remain several days."

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The innkeeper bowed in gratification and hurried off to supervise the preparation of Cugel's dinner.

Cugel made an excellent meal, though the second course, a dish of crayfish stuffed with mince and slivers of scarlet mangoneel, he found a trifle too rich. The roast fowl however could not be faulted, and the wine pleased Cugel to such an extent that he ordered a second flask. Maier the innkeeper served the bottle himself and accepted Cugel's compliments with a trace of complacency. "There is no better wine in Gundar! It is admittedly expensive, but you are a person who appreciates the best."

"Precisely true," said Cugel. "Sit down and take a glass with me. I confess to curiosity in regard to this remarkable town."

The innkeeper willingly complied. "I am puzzled that you find Gundar remarkable. I have lived here all my life, and it seems ordinary enough to me."

"I will cite three circumstances which I consider worthy of note," said Cugel, now somewhat expansive by reason of the wine. "First: the bulbous construction of your buildings. Secondly: the contrivance of lenses above the fire, which at the very least must stimulate a stranger's interest. Thirdly: the fact that the men of Gundar are all stark bald."

The innkeeper nodded thoughtfully. "The architecture at least is quickly explained. The ancient Gunds lived in enormous gourds. When a section of the wall became weak, it was replaced with a board, until in due course the folk found themselves living in houses fashioned completely of wood, and the style has persisted. As for the fire and the projectors, do you not know the world-wide Order of Solar Emosynaries? We stimulate the vitality of the sun; so long as our beam of sympathetic vibration regulates solar combustion, it will never expire. Similar stations exist at other locations: at Blue Azor; on the Isle of Brazel; at the walled city Munt; and in the observatory of the Grand Starkeeper at Vir Vassilis."

Cugel shook his head sadly. "I fear that conditions have changed. Brazel has long since sunk beneath the waves. Munt was destroyed a thousand years ago by Dystropes. I have never heard of either Blue Azor or Vir Vassilis, though I am widely traveled. Possibly, here at Gundar, you are the solitary Solar Emosynaries yet in existence."

"This is dismal news," declared Maier. "The noticeable enfeeblement of the sun is hereby explained. Perhaps we had best double the fire under our regulator."

Cugel poured more wine. "A question leaps to mind. If, as I

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suspect, this is the single Solar Emosynary station yet in operation, who or what regulates the sun when it has passed below the horizon?"

The innkeeper shook his head. "I can offer no explanation. It may be that during the hours of night the sun itself relaxes and, as it were, sleeps, although this is of course sheerest speculation."

"Allow me to offer another hypothesis," said Cugel. "Conceivably the waning of the sun has advanced beyond all possibility of regulation, so that your efforts, though formerly useful, are now ineffective."

Maier threw up his hands in perplexity. "These complications surpass my scope, but yonder stands the Nolde Huruska." He directed Cugel's attention to a large man with a deep chest, a heavy muscular belly, and a bristling black beard, who stood at the entrance. "Excuse me a moment." He rose to his feet and approaching the Nolde spoke for several minutes, indicating Cugel from time to time. The Nolde finally made a bruque gesture and marched across the garden to confront Cugel. He spoke in a heavy voice: "I understand you to assert that no Emosynaries exist other than outselves?"

"I stated nothing so definitely," said Cugel, somewhat on the defensive. "I remarked that I had traveled widely and that no other such 'Emosynary' agency has come to my attention; and I innocently speculated that possibly none now operate."

"At Gundar we conceive of 'innocence' as a positive quality, not merely an insipid absence of guilt," stated the Nolde. "We are not the fools that certain untidy ruffians might suppose."

Cugel suppressed the hot remark which rose to his lips and contented himself with a shrug. Maier walked away with the Nolde, and for several minutes the two men conferred, with frequent glances in Cugel's direction. Then the Nolde departed and the innkeeper returned to Cugel's table. "A somewhat brusque man, the Nolde of Gundar," he told Cugel, "but competent withal."

"It would be presumptuous for me to comment," said Cugel. "What, precisely, is his function?"

"At Gundar we place great store upon precision and methodicity," explained Maier. "We feel that the absence of order encourages disorder, and the official responsible for the inhibition of caprice and abnormality is the Nolde...What was our previous conversation? Ah, yes, you mentioned our notorious baldness. I can offer no definite explanation. According to our savants, the condition signifies the final perfec-

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tion of the human race. Other folk give credence to an ancient legend. A pair of magicians, Astherlin and Mauldred, vied for the favor of the Gunds. Astherlin promised the boon of extreme hairness, so that the folk of Gundar need never wear garments. Mauldred, to the contrary, offered the Gunds baldness, with all the consequent advantages, and easily won the contest; in fact Mauldred became the first Nolde of Gundar, the post now filled, as you know, by Huruska." Maier the innkeeper pursed his lips and looked off across the garden. "Huruska, a distrustful sort, has reminded me of my fixed rule to ask all transient guests to settle their accounts on a daily basis. I naturally assured him of your complete reliability, but simply in order to appease Huruska, I will tender the reckoning in the morning."

"This is tantamount to an insult," declared Cugel haughtily. "Must we truckle to the whims of Huruska? Not I, you may be assured! I will settle my account in the usual manner."

The innkeeper blinked. "May I ask how long you intend to stay?"

"My journey takes me south, by the most expeditious transport available, which I assume to be riverboat."

"The town Lumarth lies ten days by caravan across the Lirrh Aing. The Isk River also flows past Lumarth, but is judged inconvenient by virtue of three intervening localities. The Lallo Marsh is infested with stinging insects; the tree dwarfs of the Santalba Forest pelt passing boats with refuse; and the Desperate Rapids shatter both bones and boats."

"In this case I will travel by caravan," said Cugel. "Meanwhile I will remain here, unless the persecutions of Huruska become intolerable."

Maier licked his lips and looked over his shoulder. "I assured Huruska that I would adhere to the strict letter of my rule. He will surely make a great issue of the matter unless —"

Cugel made a gracious gesture. "Bring me seals. I will close up my purse, which contains a fortune in opals and alumes. We will deposit the purse in your strongbox, and you may hold it for surety. Even Huruska cannot now protest!"

Maier held up his hands in awe. "I could not undertake so large a responsibility!"

"Dismiss all fear," said Cugel. "I have protected the purse with a spell; the instant a criminal breaks the seal the jewels are transformed into pebbles."

Maier dubiously accepted Cugel's purse on these terms. They jointly saw the seals applied and the purse put into Maier's strongbox.

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Cugel now repaired to his chamber, where he bathed, commanded the services of a barber and dressed in fresh garments. Setting his cap at an appropriate angle, he strolled out upon the square.

His steps led him to the Solar Emosynary station. As before, two young men worked diligently, one stoking the blaze and adjusting the five lamps, while the other held the regulatory beam fixed upon the low sun.

Cugel inspected the contrivance from all angles, and presently the person who fed the blaze called out: "Are you not that notable traveler who today expressed doubts as to the efficacy of the Emosynary system?"

Cugel spoke carefully: "I told Maier and Huruska this: that Brazel is sunk below the Melantine Gulf and almost gone from memory; that the walled city Munt was long ago laid waste; that I am acquainted with neither Blue Azor, nor Vir Vassilis. These were my only positive statements."

The young fire stoker petulantly threw an armload of logs into the fire pit. "Still we are told that you consider our efforts impractical."

"I would not care to go so far," said Cugel politely. "Even if the other Emosynary agencies are abandoned, it is possible that the Gundar regulator suffices. Who knows?"

"I will tell you this," declared the stoker. "We work without recompense, and in our spare time we must cut and transport fuel. The process is tedious."

The operator of the aiming device amplified his friend's complaint. "Huruska and the elders do none of the work; they merely ordain that we toil, which of course is the easiest part of the project. Janred and I are of a sophisticated new generation; on principle we reject all dogmatic doctrines. I, for one, consider the Solar Emosynary system a waste of time and effort."

"If the other agencies are abandoned," argued Janred the stoker, "who or what regulates the sun when it has passed beyond the horizon? The system is pure balderdash."

The operator of the lenses declared: "I will now demonstrate as much and free us all from this thankless toil!" He worked a lever. "Notice! I direct the regulatory beam away from the sun. Look! It shines as before, without the slightest attention on our part!"

Cugel inspected the sun, and for a fact it seemed to glow as before, flickering from time to time, and shivering like an old man with the ague. The two young men watched with similar interest, and as minutes passed, they began to

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murmur in satisfaction. "We are vindicated! The sun has not gone out!"

Even as they watched, the sun, perhaps fortuitously, underwent a cachectic spasm, and lurched alarmingly toward the horizon. Behind them sounded a bellow of outrage, and the Nolde Huruska ran forward. "What is the meaning of this irresponsibility? Direct the regulator aright and instantly! Would you have us groping the rest of our lives in the dark?"

The stoker resentfully jerked his thumb toward Cugel. "He convinced us that the system was unnecessary and that our work was futile."

"What!" Huruska swung his formidable body about and confronted Cugel. "Only hours ago you set foot in Gundar, and already you are disrupting the fabric of our existence! I warn you, our patience is not illimitable! Be off with you and do not approach the Emosynary agency a second time!"

Choking with fury, Cugel swung on his heel and marched off across the square.

At the caravan terminal he inquired as to transport southward, but the caravan which had arrived at noon would be the morrow depart eastward the way it had come.

Cugel returned to the inn and stepped into the tavern. He noticed three men playing a card game and posted himself as an observer. The game proved to be a simple version of Zampolio, and presently Cugel asked if he might join the play. "But only if the stakes are not too high," he protested. "I am not particularly skillful, and I dislike losing more than a terce or two."

"Bah," exclaimed one of the players. "What is money? Who will spend it when we are dead?"

"If we take all your gold, then you need not carry if further," another remarked jocularly.

"All of us must learn," the third player assured Cugel. "You are fortunate to have the three premier experts of Gundar as instructors."

Cugel drew back in alarm. "I refuse to lose more than a single terce!"

"Come now! Don't be a prig!"

"Very well," said Cugel. "I will risk it. But these cards are tattered and dirty. By chance I have a fresh set in my pouch."

"Excellent! The game proceeds!"

Two hours later the three Gunds threw down their cards, gave Cugel long hard looks, then as if with a single mind rose to their feet and departed the tavern. Inspecting his gains, Cugel counted thirty-two terces and a few odd coppers. In a cheerful frame of mind he retired to his chamber for the night.

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In the morning as he consumed his breakfast, he noticed the arrival of the Nolde Huruska, who immediately engaged Maier the innkeeper in conversation. A few minutes later Huruska approached Cugel's table and stared down at Cugel with a somewhat menacing grin, while Maier stood anxiously a few paces to the rear.

Cugel spoke in a voice of strained politeness: "Well, what is it this time? The sun has risen; my innocence in the matter of the regulatory beam has been established."

"I am concerned with another matter. Are you acquainted with our penalties for fraud?"

Cugel shrugged. "The matter is of no interest to me."

"They are severe and I will revert to them in a moment. First, let me inquire: Did you entrust to Maier a purse purportedly containing valuable jewels?"

"I did indeed. The property is protected by a spell, I may add; if the seal is broken, the gems become ordinary pebbles."

Huruska exhibited the purse. "Notice, the seal is intact. I cut a slit in the leather and looked within. The contents were then and are now —" with a flourish Huruska turned the purse out upon the table "— pebbles identical to those in the road yonder."

Cugel exclaimed in outrage, "The jewels are now worthless rubble! I hold you responsible and you must make recompense!"

Huruska uttered an offensive laugh. "If you can change gems to pebbles, you can change pebbles to gems. Maier will now tender the bill. If you refuse to pay, I intend to have you nailed into the enclosure under the gallows until such a time as you change your mind."

"Your insinuations are both disgusting and absurd," declared Cugel. "Innkeeper, present your account! Let us finish with this farrago once and for all."

Maier came forward with a slip of paper. "I make the total to be eleven terces, plus whatever gratuities might seem in order."

"There will be no gratuities," said Cugel. "Do you harass all your guests in this fashion?" He flung eleven terces down. "Take your money and leave me in peace."

Maier sheepishly gathered up the coins; Huruska made an inarticulate sound and turned away. Cugel, upon finishing his breakfast, went out once more to stroll across the square. Here he met an individual whom he recognized to be the potboy in the tavern, and Cugel signaled him to a halt. "You seem an alert and knowledgeable fellow," said Cugel. "May I inquire your name?"

"I am generally known as 'Zeller.'"

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"I would guess you to be well acquainted with the folk of Gundar."

"I consider myself well-informed. Why do you ask?"

"First," said Cugel, "let me ask if you care to turn your knowledge to profit?"

"Certainly, so long as I evade the attention of the Nolde."

"Very good. I notice a disused booth yonder which should serve our purpose. In one hour we shall put our enterprise into operation."

Cugel returned to the inn, where at his request Maier brought a board, a brush and paint. Cugel composed a sign:

THE EMINENT SEER CUGEL
COUNSELS, INTERPRETS,
PROGNOSTICATES.
ASK YOU WILL BE ANSWERED!
CONSULTATIONS:
THREE TERCES.

Cugel hung the sign above the booth, arranged curtains and waited for customers. The potboy, meanwhile, had inconspicuously secreted himself at the back.

Almost immediately folk crossing the square halted to read the sign. A woman of early middle-age presently came forward. "Three terces is a large sum. What results can you guarantee?"

"None whatever, by the very nature of things. I am a skilled voyant, I have acquaintance with the arts of magic, but knowledge comes to me from unknown and uncontrollable sources."

The woman paid over her money. "Three terces is cheap if you can resolve my worries. My daughter all her life has enjoyed the best of health, but now she ails and suffers a morose condition. All my remedies are to no avail. What must I do?"

"A moment, madame, while I meditate." Cugel drew the curtain and leaned back to where he could hear the potboy's whispered remarks, then once again drew aside the curtains.

"I have made myself one with the cosmos! Knowledge has entered my mind! Your daughter Dilian is pregnant. For an additional three terces I will supply the father's name."

"This is a fee I pay with pleasure," declared the woman grimly. She paid, received the information and marched purposefully away.

Another woman approached, paid three terces, and Cugel addressed himself to her problem. "My husband assured me that he had put by a canister of gold coins against the future, but upon his death I could find not so much as a copper. Where has he hidden it?"

Cugel closed the curtains, took counsel with the potboy and again appeared to the woman. "I have discouraging news for you. Your

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husband Finister spent much of his hoarded gold at the tavern. With the rest he purchased an amethyst brooch for a woman named Varletta."

The news of Cugel's remarkable abilities spread rapidly, and trade was brisk. Shortly before noon, a large woman, muffled and veiled, approached the booth, paid three terces, and asked in a high-pitched, if husky, voice: "Read me my fortune!"

Cugel drew the curtain and consulted the potboy, who was at a loss. "It is no one I know. I can tell you nothing."

"No matter," said Cugel. "My suspicions are verified." He drew aside the curtain. "The portents are unclear and I refuse to take your money." Cugel returned the fee. "I can tell you this much: you are an individual of domineering character and no great intelligence. Ahead lies what? Honors? A long voyage by water? Revenge on your enemies? Wealth? The image is distorted; I may be reading my own future."

The woman tore away her veils and stood revealed as the Nolde Huruska. "Master Cugel, you are lucky indeed that you returned my money; otherwise I would have taken you up for deceptive practices. In any event, I deem your activities mischievous and contrary to the public interest. Gundar is in an uproar because of your revelations; there will be no more of them. Take down your sign and be happily thankful that you have escaped so easily."

"I will be glad to terminate my enterprise," said Cugel with dignity. "The work is taxing."

Huruska stalked away in a huff. Cugel divided his earnings with the potboy, and in a spirit of mutual satisfaction they departed the booth.

Cugel dined on the best that the inn afforded, but later when he went into the tavern, he discovered a noticeable lack of amiability among the patrons and presently went off to his chamber.

The next morning as he took breakfast, a caravan of ten wagons arrived in town. The principal cargo appeared to be a bevy of seventeen beautiful maidens, who rode upon two of the wagons. Three other wagons served as dormitories, while the remaining five were loaded with stores, trunks, bales and cases. The caravan master, a portly mild-seeming man with flowing brown hair and a silky beard, assisted his delightful charges to the ground and led them all to the inn, where Maier served up an ample breakfast of spiced porridge, preserved quince, and tea.

Cugel watched the group as they made their meal and reflected

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that a journey to almost any destination in such company would be a pleasant journey indeed.

The Nolde Huruska appeared and went to pay his respects to the caravan leader. The two conversed amiably at some length, while Cugel waited impatiently.

Huruska at last departed. The maidens, having finished their meal, went off to stroll about the square. Cugel crossed to the table where the caravan leader sat. "Sir, my name is Cugel, and I would appreciate a few words with you."

"By all means! Please be seated. Will you take a glass of excellent tea?"

"Thank you. First, may I inquire the destination of your caravan?"

The caravan leader showed surprise at Cugel's ignorance. "We are bound for Lumarth; these are the 'Seventeen Virgins of Symnathis' who traditionally grace the Grand Pageant."

"I am a stranger to this region," Cugel explained. "Hence I know nothing of the local customs. In any event, I myself am bound for Lumarth and would be pleased to travel with your caravan."

The caravan leader gave an affable assent. "I would be delighted to have you with us."

"Excellent!" said Cugel. "Then all is arranged."

The caravan leader stroked his silky brown beard. "I must warn you that my fees are somewhat higher than usual, owing to the expensive amenities I am obliged to provide these seventeen maidens."

"Indeed," said Cugel. "How much do you require?"

"The journey occupies the better part of ten days, and my minimum charge is twenty terces per diem, for a total of two hundred terces, plus a twenty-terce supplement for wine."

"This is far more than I can afford," said Cugel in a bleak voice. "At the moment I command only a third of this sum. Is there some means by which I might earn my passage?"

"Unfortunately not," said the caravan leader. "Only this morning the position of armed guard was open, which even paid a small stipend, but Huruska the Nolde, who wishes to visit Lumarth, has agreed to serve in this capacity, and the post is now filled."

Cugel made a sound of disappointment and raised his eyes to the sky. When at last he could bring himself to speak, he asked, "When do you plan to depart?"

"Tomorrow at dawn, with absolute punctuality. I am sorry that we will not have the pleasure of your company."

"I share your sorrow," said Cugel. He returned to his own table and sat brooding. Presently he went

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into the tavern, where various card games were in progress. Cugel attempted to join the play, but in every case his request was denied. In a surly mood he went to the counter where Maier the innkeeper unpacked a crate of earthenware goblets. Cugel tried to initiate a conversation, but for once Maier could take no time from his labors. "The Nolde Huruska goes off on a journey, and tonight his friends mark the occasion with a farewell party, for which I must make careful preparations."

Cugel took a mug of beer to a side table and gave himself to reflection. After a few moments he went out the back exit and surveyed the prospect, which here overlooked the Isk River. Cugel sauntered down to the water's edge and discovered a dock at which the fishermen moored their punts and dried their nets. Cugel looked up and down the river, then returned up the path to the inn to spend the rest of the day watching the seventeen maidens as they strolled about the square or sipped sweet lime tea in the garden of the inn.

The sun set; twilight the color of old wine darkened into night. Cugel set about his preparations, which were quickly achieved, inasmuch as the essence of his plan lay in its simplicity.

The caravan leader, whose name, so Cugel learned, was Shimilko, assembled his exquisite company for their evening meal, then herded them carefully to the dormitory wagons, despite the pouts and protests of those who wished to remain at the inn to enjoy the festivities of the evening.

In the tavern the farewell party in honor of Huruska had already commenced. Cugel seated himself in a dark corner and presently attracted the attention of the perspiring Maier. Cugel produced ten terces. "I admit that I have harbored ungrateful thoughts toward Huruska," he said. "Now I wish to express my good wishes — in absolute anonymity, however! Whenever Huruska starts upon a mug of ale, I want you to place another full mug before him, so that his evening will be incessantly merry. If he asks who has bought the drink, you are only to reply: 'One of your friends wishes to pay you a compliment.' Is this clear?"

"Absolutely, and I will do as you command. It is a large-hearted gesture, which Huruska will appreciate."

The evening progressed. Huruska's friends sang jovial songs and proposed a dozen toasts, in all of which Huruska joined. As Cugel had required, whenever Huruska so much as started to drink from a mug, another was placed at his elbow, and Cugel marveled at Huruska's internal reservoirs.

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At last Huruska was prompted to excuse himself from the company. He staggered out the back exit and made his way to that stone wall with a trough below, which had been placed for the convenience of the tavern's patrons.

As Huruska faced the wall, Cugel stepped behind him and flung a fisherman's net over Huruska's head, then expertly dropped a noose around Huruska's burly shoulders, followed by other turns and ties. Huruska's bellows were drowned by the song at this moment being sung in his honor.

Cugel dragged the cursing hulk down the path to the dock and rolled him over and into a punt. Untying the mooring line, Cugel pushed the punt out into the current of the river. "At the very least," Cugel told himself, "two parts of my prophecy are accurate; Huruska has been honored in the tavern and now is about to enjoy a voyage by water."

He returned to the tavern where Huruska's absence had at last been noticed. Maier expressed the opinion that, with an early departure in the offing, Huruska had prudently retired to bed, and all conceded that this was no doubt the case.

The next morning Cugel arose an hour before dawn. He took a quick breakfast, paid Maier his score, then went to where Shimilko ordered his caravan.

"I bring news from Huruska," said Cugel. "Owing to an unfortunate set of personal circumstances, he finds himself unable to make the journey and has commended me to that post for which you had engaged him."

Shimilko shook his head in wonder. "A pity! Yesterday he seemed so enthusiastic! Well, we all must be flexible, and since Huruska cannot join us, I am pleased to accept you in his stead. As soon as we start, I will instruct you in your duties, which are straightforward. You must stand guard by night and take your rest by day, although in the case of danger I naturally expect you to join in the defense of the caravan."

"These duties are well within my competence," said Cugel. "I am ready to depart at your convenience."

"Yonder rises the sun," declared Shimilko. "Let us be off and away for Lumarth."

Ten days later Shimilko's caravan passed through the Methune Gap, and the great Vale of Coram opened before them. The brimming Isk wound back and forth, reflecting a sultry sheen; in the distance loomed the long dark mass of the Draven Forest. Closer at hand, five domes of shimmering gloss marked the site of Lumarth.

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Shimilko addressed himself to the company. "Below lies what remains of the old city Lumarth. Do not be deceived by the domes; they indicate temples at one time sacred to the five demons Yaunt, Jastenave, Phampoun, Adelmar and Suul, and hence were preserved during the Sampathissic Wars.

"The folk of Lumarth are unlike any of your experience. Many are small sorcerers, though Chaladet the Grand Thururge has proscribed magic within the city precincts. You may conceive these people to be languid and wan and dazed by excess sensation, and you will be correct. All are obsessively rigid in regard to ritual, and all subscribe to a Doctrine of Absolute Altruism, which compels them to virtue and benevolence. For this reason they are known as the 'Kind Folk.' A final word in regard to our journey, which luckily has gone without untoward incident. The wagoneers have driven with skill; Cugel has vigilantly guarded us by night, and I am well pleased. So then: onward to Lumarth, and let meticulous discretion be the slogan!"

The caravan traversed a narrow track down into the valley, then proceeded along an avenue of rutted stone under an arch of enormous black mimosa trees.

At a moldering portal opening upon the plaza the caravan was met by five tall men in gowns of embroidered silks, the splendid double-crowned headgear of the Coramese Thurists lending them an impressive dignity. The five men were much alike, with pale transparent skins, thin high-bridged noses, slender limbs and pensive gray eyes. One who wore a gorgeous gown of mustard-yellow, crimson and black raised two fingers in a calm salute. "My friend Shimilko, you have arrived securely with all your blessed cargo. We are well-served and well-pleased."

"The Lirrh Aing was so placid as almost to be dull," said Shimilko. "To be sure, I was fortunate in securing the services of Cugel, who guarded us so well by night that never were our slumbers interrupted."

"Excellent! Well done, Cugel! We will at this time take custody of the precious maidens. Tomorrow you may render your account to the bursar. The Wayfarer's Inn lies yonder, and I counsel you to its comforts."

"Just so! We will all be the better for a few days rest!"

However, Cugel chose not to so indulge himself. At the door to the inn he told Shimilko: "Here we part company, for I must continue along the way. Affairs press on me, and Almery lies far to the west."

"But your stipend, Cugel! You

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must wait at least until tomorrow, when I can collect certain monies from the bursar. Until then, I am without funds."

Cugel hesitated, but at last was prevailed upon to stay.

An hour later a messenger strode into the inn. "Master Shimilko, you and your company are required to appear instantly before the Grand Thururge on a matter of the utmost importance."

Shimilko looked up in alarm. "Whatever is the matter?"

"I am obliged to tell you nothing more."

With a long face Shimilko led his company across the plaza to the loggia before the old palace, where Chaladet sat on a massive chair. To either side stood the College of Thurists, and all regarded Shimilko with somber expressions.

"What is the meaning of this summons?" inquired Shimilko. "Why do you regard me with such gravity?"

The Thururge spoke in a deep voice: "Shimilko, the seventeen maidens conveyed by you from Symnathis to Lumarth have been examined, and I regret to say that of the seventeen, only two can be classified as virgins. The remaining fifteen have been sexually deflorated."

Shimilko could hardly speak for consternation. "Impossible!" he sputtered. "At Symnathis I undertook the most elaborate precautions. I can display three separate documents certifying the purity of each. There is no room for doubt! You are in error!"

"We are not in error, Master Shimilko. Conditions are as we describe and may easily be verified."

"'Impossible' and 'incredible' are the only two words which come to mind," cried Shimilko. "Have you questioned the girls themselves?"

"Of course. They merely raise their eyes to the ceiling and whistle between their teeth. Shimilko, how do you explain this heinous outrage?"

"I am perplexed to the point of confusion! The girls embarked upon the journey as pure as the day they were born. This is fact! During each waking instant they never left my area of perception. This is also fact."

"And when you slept?"

"The implausibility is no less extreme. The teamsters invariably retired together in a group. I shared my wagon with the chief teamster, and each of us will vouch for the other. Cugel meanwhile kept watch over the entire camp."

"Alone?"

"A single guard suffices, even though the nocturnal hours are slow and dismal. Cugel, however, never complained."

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"Cugel is evidently the culprit!"

Shimilko smilingly shook his head. "Cugel's duties left him no time for illicit activity."

"What if Cugel scamped his duties?"

Shimilko responded patiently, "Remember, each girl rested secure in her private cubicle with a door between herself and Cugel."

"Well, then — what if Cugel opened this door and quietly entered the cubicle?"

Shimilko considered it for a dubious moment and pulled at his silky beard. "In such a case, I suppose the matter might be possible."

The Grand Thururge turned his gaze upon Cugel. "I insist that you make an exact statement upon this sorry affair."

Cugel cried out indignantly, "The investigation is a travesty! My honor has been assailed!"

Chaladet fixed Cugel with a benign, if somewhat chilly, stare. "You will be allowed redemption. Thurists, I place this person in your custody. See to it that he has every opportunity to regain his dignity and self-esteem!"

Cugel roared out a protest which the Grand Thururge ignored. From his great dais he looked thoughtfully off across the square. "Is it the third or the fourth month?"

"The chronolog has only just left the month of Yaunt to enter the time of Phampoun."

"So be it. By diligence, this licentious rogue may yet earn our love and respect."

A pair of Thurists grasped Cugel's arms and led him across the square. Cugel jerked this way and that to no avail. "Where are you taking me? What is the meaning of this nonsense?"

One of the Thurists replied in a kindly voice, "We are taking you to the Temple of Phampoun, and it is far from nonsense."

"I do not care for any of this," said Cugel. "Take your hands off of me; I intend to leave Lumarth at once."

"You shall be so assisted."

The group marched up worn marble steps, through an enormous arched portal, into an echoing hall, distinguished only by the high dome and an adytum or altar at the far end. Cugel was led into a side chamber, illuminated by high circular windows and paneled with dark-blue wood. An old man in a white gown entered the room and asked, "What have we here? A person suffering affliction?"

"Yes, Cugel has committed a series of abominable crimes, of which he wishes to purge himself."

"A total misstatement!" cried Cugel. "No proof has been adduced, and I was inveigled against my better judgement."

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The Thurists, paying no heed, departed, and Cugel was left with the old man, who hobbled to a bench and seated himself. Cugel started to speak, but the old man held up his hand. "Calm yourself! You must remember that we are a benevolent people, lacking all spite or malice. We exist only to help other sentient beings! If a person commits a crime, we are racked with sorrow for the criminal, whom we believe to be the true victim, and we work without compromise that he may renew himself."

"An enlightened viewpoint!" declared Cugel. "Already I feel regeneration!"

"Excellent! Your remarks validate our philosophy; certainly you have negotiated what I will refer to as Phase One of the program."

Cugel frowned. "There are other phases? Are they really necessary?"

"Yes, indeed; these are Phases Two and Three. I should explain that Lumarth has not always adhered to such a policy. During the high years of the Great Magics the city fell under the sway of Yasbane the Obviator, who breached openings into five demon realms and constructed the five temples of Lumarth. You stand now in the Temple of Phampoun."

"Odd," said Cugel, "that a folk so benevolent are such fervent demonists."

"Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Kind Folk of Lumarth expelled Yasbane, to establish the Era of Love, which must now persist until the final waning of the sun. Our love extends to all, even Yasbane's five demons, whom we hope to rescue from their malevolent evil. You will be the latest in a long line of noble individuals who have worked to this end, and such is Phase Two."

Cugel stood limp in consternation. "Such work far exceeds my competence!"

"Everyone feels the same sensation," said the old man. "Nevertheless, Phampoun must be instructed in kindness, consideration and decency; by making this effort, you will know a surge of happy redemption."

"And Phase Three?" croaked Cugel. "What of that?"

"When you achieve your mission, then you shall be gloriously accepted into our brotherhood!" The old man ignored Cugel's groan of dismay. "Let me see now: the month of Yaunt is just now ending, and we enter the month of Phampoun, who is perhaps the most irascible of the five by reason of his sensitive eyes. He becomes enraged by so much as a single glimmer, and you must attempt your persuasions in absolute darkness. Do you have any further questions?"

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"Yes, indeed! Suppose Phampoun refuses to mend his ways?"

"This is 'negativistic thinking' which we Kind Folk refuse to recognize. Ignore everything you may have heard in regard to Phampoun's macabre habits! Go forth in confidence!"

Cugel cried out in anguish, "How will I return to enjoy my honors and rewards?"

"No doubt Phampoun, when contrite, will send you aloft by a means at his disposal," said the old man. "Now I bid you farewell."

"One moment! Where is food and drink? How will I survive?"

"Again we will leave these matters to the discretion of Phampoun." The old man touched a button; the floor opened under Cugel's feet; he slid down a spiral chute at dizzying velocity. The air gradually became syrupy; Cugel struck a film of invisible constriction which burst with a sound like a cork leaving a bottle, and Cugel emerged into a chamber of medium size, illuminated by the glow of a single lamp.

Cugel stood stiff and rigid, hardly daring to breathe. On a dais across the chamber Phampoun sat sleeping in a massive chair, two black hemispheres shuttering his enormous eyes against the light. The gray torso wallowed almost the length of the dais; the massive splayed legs were planted flat to the floor. Arms, as large around as Cugel himself, terminated in fingers three feet long, each bedecked with a hundred jeweled rings. Phampoun's head was as large as a wheelbarrow, with a huge snout and an enormous loose-wattled mouth. The two eyes, each the size of a dishpan, could not be seen for the protective hemispheres.

Cugel, holding his breath in fear and also against the stench which hung in the air, looked cautiously about the room. A cord ran from the lamp, across the ceiling, to dangle beside Phampoun's fingers; almost as a reflex Cugel detached the cord from the lamp. He saw a single egress from the chamber: a low iron door directly behind Phampoun's chair. The chute by which he had entered was now invisible.

The flaps beside Phampoun's mouth twitched and lifted; a homunculus growing from the end of Phampoun's tongue peered forth. It stared at Cugel with beady black eyes. "Ha, has time gone by so swiftly?" The creature, leaning forward, consulted a mark on the wall. "It has indeed; I have overslept and Phampoun will be cross. What is your name and what are your crimes? These details are of interest to Phampoun — which is to say myself, though from whimsy I usually call myself Pulsifer, as if I were a separate entity."

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Cugel spoke in a voice of brave conviction: "I am Cugel, inspector for the new regime which now holds sway in Lumarth. I descended to verify Phampoun's comfort, and since all is well, I will now return aloft. Where is the exit?"

Pulsifer asked plaintively, "You have no crimes to relate? This is harsh news. Both Phampoun and I enjoy great evils. Not long ago a certain sea trader, whose name evades me, held us enthralled for over an hour."

"And then what occurred?"

"Best not to ask." Pulsifer busied himself polishing one of Phampoun's tusks with a small brush. He thrust his head forth and inspected the mottled visage above him. "Phampoun still sleeps soundly; he ingested a prodigious meal before retiring. Excuse me while I check the progress of Phampoun's digestion." Pulsifer ducked back behind Phampoun's wattles and revealed himself only by a vibration in the corded gray neck. Presently he returned to view. "He is quite famished, or so it would appear. I had best wake him; he will wish to converse with you before..."

"Before what?"

"No matter."

"A moment," said Cugel. "I am interested in conversing with you rather than Phampoun."

"Indeed?" asked Pulsifer, and polished Phampoun's fang with great vigor. "This is pleasant to hear; I receive few compliments."

"Strange! I see much in you to commend. Necessarily your career goes hand in hand with that of Phampoun, but perhaps you have goals and ambitions of your own?"

Pulsifer propped up Phampoun's lip with his cleaning brush and relaxed upon the ledge so created. "Sometimes I feel that I would enjoy seeing something of the outer world. We have ascended several times to the surface, but always by night when heavy clouds obscure the stars, and even then Phampoun complains of the excessive glare, and he quickly returns below."

"A pity," said Cugel. "By day there is much to see. The scenery surrounding Lumarth is pleasant. The Kind Folk are about to present their Grand Pageant of Ultimate Contrasts, which is said to be most picturesque."

Pulsifer gave his head a wistful shake. "I doubt if ever I will see such events. Have you witnessed many horrid crimes?"

"Indeed I have. For instance, I recall a dwarf of the Batvar Forest who rode a pelgrane —"

Pulsifer interrupted him with a gesture. "A moment. Phampoun will want to hear this." He leaned precariously from the cavernous mouth to peer up toward the

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shuttered eyeballs. "Is he, or more accurately, am I awake? I thought I noted a twitch. In any event, though I have enjoyed our conversation, we must get on with our duties. Hm, the light cord is disarranged. Perhaps you will be good enough to extinguish the light."

"There is no hurry," said Cugel. "Phampoun sleeps peacefully; let him enjoy his rest. I have something to show you, a game of skill and chance. Are you acquainted with 'Zampolio'?"

Pulsifer signified in the negative, and Cugel produced his cards. "Notice carefully! I deal you four cards and I take four cards, which we conceal from each other." Cugel explained the rules of the game. "Necessarily we play for coins or gold or some such commodity, to make the game interesting. I therefore wager five terces, which you must match."

"Yonder in two sacks is Phampoun's gold, or with equal propriety, my gold, since I am an integral adjunct to this vast hulk. Take forth gold sufficient to equal your terces."

The game proceeded. Pulsifer won the first sally, to his delight, then lost the next, which prompted him to fill the air with dismal complaints; then he won again and again until Cugel declared himself lacking further funds. "You are a clever player indeed; it is a joy to match wits with you! Still, I feel I could beat you had I the sack of terces I left above in the temple."

Pulsifer, somewhat puffed and vainglorious, scoffed at Cugel's boast. "I fear that I am too clever for you! Here, take back your terces and we will play the game once again."

"No, this is not the way sportsmen behave; I am too proud to accept your money. Let me suggest a solution to the problem. In the temple above is my sack of terces and a parcel of sweetmeats which you might wish to consume as we continue our game. Let us go fetch these articles; then I defy you to win as before!"

Pulsifer leaned far out to inspect Phampoun's visage. "He appears quite comfortable, though his organs are roiling with hunger."

"He sleeps as soundly as ever," declared Cugel. "Let us hurry. If he wakes, our game will be spoiled."

Pulsifer hesitated. "What of Phampoun's gold? We dare not leave it unguarded!"

"We will take it with us, and it will never be outside the range of our vigilance."

"Very well, place it here on the dais."

"So, and now I am ready. How do we go aloft?"

"Merely press the leaden bulb

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beside the arm of the chair, but please make no untoward disturbance. Phampoun might well be exasperated should he awake in unfamiliar surroundings."

"He has never rested easier! We go aloft!" He pressed the button; the dais shivered and creaked and floated up a dark shaft which opened above them. Presently they burst through the valve of constrictive essence which Cugel had penetrated on his way down the chute. At once a glimmer of scarlet light seeped into the shaft, and a moment later the dais glided to a halt level with the altar in the Temple of Phampoun.

"Now then, my sack of terces," said Cugel. "Exactly where did I leave it? Just over yonder, I believe. Notice! Through the great arches you may overlook the main plaza of Lumarth, and those are the Kind Folk going about their ordinary affairs. What is your opinion of all this?"

"Most interesting, although I am unfamiliar with such extensive vistas. In fact, I feel almost a sense of vertigo. What is the source of the savage red glare?"

"That is the light of our ancient sun, now westering toward sunset."

"It does not appeal to me. Please be quick about your business; I have suddenly become most uneasy."

"I will make haste," said Cugel.

The sun, sinking low, sent a shaft of light through the portal, to play full upon the altar. Cugel, stepping behind the massive chair, twitched away the two shutters which guarded Phampoun's eyes, and the milky orbs glistened in the sunlight. For an instant Phampoun lay quiet. His muscles knotted, his legs jerked, his mouth gaped wide, and he emitted an explosion of sound: a grinding scream which propelled Pulsifer forth to vibrate like a flag in the wind. Phampoun lunged from the altar to fall sprawling and rolling across the floor of the temple, all the while maintaining his cataclysmic outcries. He pulled himself erect, and pounding the tiled floor with his great feet, he sprang here and there and at last burst through the stone walls as if they were paper, while the Kind Folk in the square stood petrified.

Cugel, taking the two sacks of gold, departed the temple by a side entrance. For a moment he watched Phampoun careering around the square, screaming and flailing at the sun. Pulsifer, desperately gripping a pair of tusks, attempted to steer the maddened demon, who, ignoring all restraint, plunged eastward through the city, trampling down trees, bursting through houses as if they failed to exist.

Cugel walked briskly down to

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the Isk and made his way out upon a dock. He selected a skiff of good proportions, equipped with mast, sail and oars, and prepared to clamber aboard. A punt approached the dock from upriver, poled vigorously by a large man in tattered garments. Cugel turned away, pretending no more than a casual interest in the view, until he might board the skiff without attracting attention.

The punt touched the dock; the boatman climbed up a ladder. Cugel continued to gaze across the water, affecting indifference to all except the river vistas.

The man, panting and grunting, came to a sudden halt. Cugel felt his intent inspection, and finally turning, looked into the congested face of Huruska, the Nolde of Gundar, though this face was barely recognizable for the bites Huruska had suffered from the insects of the Lallo Marsh.

Huruska stared long and hard at Cugel. "This is a most gratifying occasion!" he said huskily. "I feared that we would never meet again! The thought caused me more woe than I can explain. And what do you carry in those leather bags?" He wrested a bag from Cugel. "Gold from the weight. Your prophecy has been totally vindicated! First honors and a voyage by water, now wealth and revenge! Prepare to die!"

"One moment!" cried Cugel. "You have neglected properly to moor the punt! This is disorderly conduct!"

Huruska turned to look, and Cugel thrust him off the dock into the water.

Cursing and raving, Huruska struggled for the shore while Cugel fumbled with the knots in the mooring line of the skiff. The line at last came loose; Cugel pulled the skiff close as Huruska came charging down the dock like a bull. Cugel had no choice but to abandon his gold, jump into the skiff, push off and ply the oars while Huruska stood waving his arms in rage.

Cugel pensively hoisted the sail; the wind carried him down the river and around a bend. Cugel's last view of Lumarth, in the dying light of afternoon, included the low lustrous domes of the demon temples and the dark outline of Huruska standing on the dock. From afar the screams of Phampoun were still to be heard and occasionally the thud of toppling masonry.

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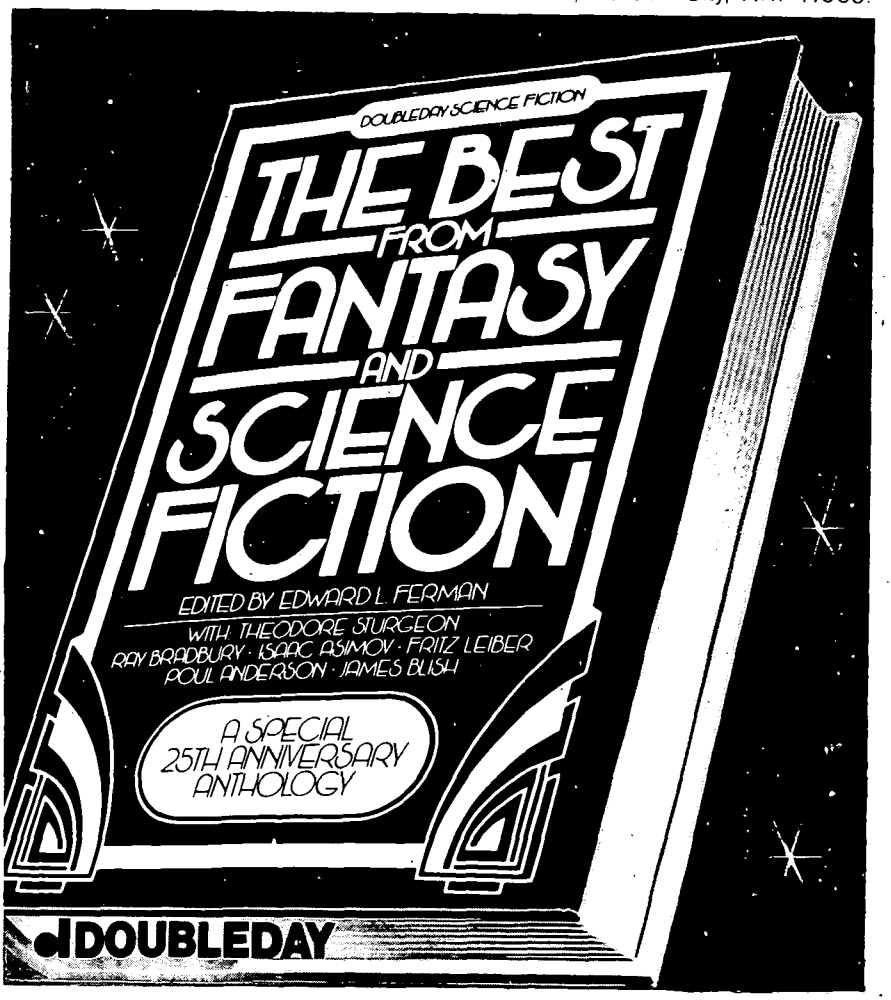
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